

Politics and Society
in the Baltic Sea Region



Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet

Edited by Jeffers Engelhardt
and Katherine Pukinskis

5



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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Press

1632

Series editor: Catherine Gibson
Design and layout: Kairi Kullasepp
Cover design: Kalle Paalits
Copyright: University of Tartu, 2024
Home page of the series: www.tyk.ee/psbsr

This publication was supported by a grant from the Faculty of
Social Sciences Development Fund.

ISSN 2228-4451 (print)
ISBN 978-9916-27-554-2 (print)
ISSN 2228-446X (online)
ISBN 978-9916-27-555-9 (online)

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Acknowledgements

As this project emerged from conversations between the editors about how we might strengthen connections among artists and scholars and develop global conversations about Baltic musics, it quickly took on the collaborative form we had worked toward. We begin, then, by extending our gratitude to all those who participated in the January 2022 conference ‘Baltic Musics: After the Post-Soviet.’ Oliver Aas, Živilė Arnašiūtė, Ilze Cepurniece, Brigitta Davidjants, Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė, Heather MacLaughlin Garbes, Laura Jēkabsons, Sofia Joons Gylling, Kevin Karnes, Sophia Kirsanova, Magdalena Nowicka-Ciecierska, Ilya Shneyveys, Zane Šmite, Rūta Stanevičiūtė, Johann van Niekerk, and friends and colleagues who joined in our conversations and listening.

At Amherst College, we wish to thank the Center for Humanistic Inquiry (CHI) for hosting the conference and Darryl Harper, CHI director, for his encouragement at all stages of our work. We also thank the Amherst College Department of Music, Department of Russian, European Studies Program, the Amherst Center for Russian Culture, and the Office of the Provost and Dean of the Faculty for their support.

At the University of Tartu, we thank Catherine Gibson for her support and care in making it possible to publish this project in the *Politics and Society in the Baltic Sea Region* series. We also thank the two reviewers for the University of Tartu Press for generously sharing their expertise and insights – this volume benefited tremendously from their efforts.

Finally, we dedicate *Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet* to those whose artistic work and scholarship we are indebted to, and to those who continue to cultivate Baltic musics and Baltic music studies.

Jeffers Engelhardt
Katherine Pukinskis
May 2024

Introduction

Jeffers Engelhardt and Katherine Pukinskis

Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet came together at a three-day virtual conference in January 2022 – one month before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in a war of aggression marking another end of the post-Soviet order (see Nachescu, 2022). With Russia’s army massing on Ukraine’s border, a feeling of dread pervaded the conference, making scholarly exchange and musical performance seem senseless in our moments of disbelief and desperation. In 2024 amid the war’s waves of inhuman terror, environmental ruin, and aligned defiance, the questions that inspired the conference, recast through new waves of trauma, precarity, displacement, and death, remain urgent far beyond the fields of music studies and music making. Ukrainians and the war in Ukraine have become everyday parts of the Baltic spaces in which these chapters were written, and the histories, expressions, and geopolitics they shape have become part of the fabric of these authors’ music making and scholarship.

This book begins to address a set of pressing contemporary questions in music studies and beyond: How do we hear and act upon Ukrainian, Baltic, and other voices in media and policy spaces and our professional, artistic, and personal lives insisting against a post-Soviet frame? How do we move, in other words, from the Baltic postcolonial (Kelertas, 2006; Moore, 2001) – an artifact of ‘the spatiotemporal coordinates of Eurocentric epistemic infrastructures’ (Rexhepi, 2023, p. 10) – to the ‘pluriversal rather than universal’ (Tlostanova, 2023, p. 149) of the Baltic decolonial (Rexhepi, 2023; Walsh and Mignolo, 2018)? How do we begin to decolonize institutionalized narratives and repertoires to hear and recognize spaces of cultural and spiritual sovereignty

under Soviet occupation and across Cold War divides? If we refuse to listen and think in the anachronistic, colonized mode of the pre-Soviet, is it time to listen and think beyond the post-Soviet and its habits of ‘Westspaining’? Finally, how do we centre, belatedly, voices from different generations and academic and artistic traditions echoing long-established commitments in decolonial scholarly, creative, and political practice to shape the fields of Baltic musics? These questions reflect a key conceptual transition in the story of this project, moving from the temporal frame of the conference’s original title (*Baltic Musics After the Post-Soviet*) to the more capacious decolonizing aims of the final title (*Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet*).

Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet is a collection of essays and conversations bringing together different generations of scholars and artists to continue along critical new paths in Baltic cultural studies from the position of sound and music. The volume is dedicated to documenting and understanding the chronologies and imaginaries that emerge as the post-Soviet – always once occupied, once colonized – is decentred in Baltic musical life and scholarship. In the decades since 1990, arts organizations, performers, and consumers in re-independent Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have transformed what sounds qualify as music, what people qualify as Baltic, and what Baltic music is. In the early 1990s, scholars prioritized the rescue, rehabilitation, and preservation of materials and narratives that were censored and destroyed in the former Soviet Union. At a post-Soviet moment hinged between past occupation and unknown futures, a generation of researchers and music makers documented their experience in work celebrating perseverance and new artistic and intellectual possibilities. Today, as a generation of young professionals establishes their own work in the twenty-first century, there are clear shifts beyond the post-Soviet. Those born and educated beyond Soviet occupation live and know differently than their parents, mentors, and teachers. Their ‘second-hand’ experience of the Soviet (and, for the youngest generation, of the post-Soviet) intersects with access to new, non-Baltic or Baltic-hybrid sounds and spaces to cultivate a fertile (and, at times, conflicted) intergenerational meeting ground for creative and scholarly work.

The authors here represent these dynamic shifts in generational and aesthetic perspectives on a (re)new(ed) ecosystem of Baltic music. They work in music studies (Arnašiūtė, Davidjants, Engelhardt, Gaidamavičiūtė, Karnes, and Stanevičiūtė), comparative literature (Aas), sociology (Joons Gylling), and as performers and composers (Garbes, Jēkabsone, Kirsanova, Pukinskis, and van Niekerk), with many overlapping several of these fields. This volume

offers one set of answers to the question of ‘what counts’ (Hisama, 2021) as legible in music research; it exerts pressure on the comfortable boundaries of historically prominent research topics and sources commonly glossed as post-Soviet. It asks ‘what counts’ as audible in music studies, including scholarship on popular, punk, and neo-traditional/neo-folk genres. The volume further expands the concept of who counts as research contributors by centring the voices of practicing musicians and, as a decolonizing practice, rejecting the ‘sacrifice of choosing the side of the studying subject, not the studied object’ (Tlostanova, 2023, p. 155). Research can be practice, and practice can be research (Spatz, 2015). Each author’s positionality – and, indeed, the co-editors’ identities – contribute to understanding the qualities that make up our current locations in the spaces of ‘Baltic’ and ‘beyond.’

The contributors to *Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet* revisit archives and musical media, rethink historiographic and ethnographic practices, and reposition the work of creation and performance to show what happens as processes of return, restoration, and revival characterizing contemporary life in the Baltics give way to new urgencies and realities. The volume examines what happens as generations less impacted by direct experiences of Soviet occupation and coloniality (including non-Baltic researchers and artists) create sounds and scholarship beyond the post-Soviet. Additionally, it accounts for what is lost beyond the post-Soviet: what shared memories, ideals, and sounds are now markers of a past?

The idea of ‘Baltic musics’ has long been contested on stylistic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and institutional grounds as an artifact of coloniality and occupation (e.g. Boiko, 2002; Karnes and Braun, 2009; Lippus, 1999). At the same time, musicians, scholars, instruments, and sounds have long circulated within the Baltic Sea region, creating networks of sonic and scholarly collaboration across historical and ideological differences (e.g. Karnes, 2021; Reimann, 2022; Šmidchens, 2014; Stanevičiūtė and Povilionienė, 2015). Over the thirty-plus years since the end of occupation, musicians and scholars have integrated what is particular and what is common in Baltic musics around post-Soviet realities in creative life and research. Despite being impossible to pin down (Tlostanova, 2018), the post-Soviet has, in other words, served as the latest – but not the only – unifying frame for the ruptures and continuities that connect Baltic musics. And in light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the links between music, sound, and decolonial sovereignty (Sonevsky, 2019) are cultivated with renewed intensity in the Baltics.

But what are the limits of the post-Soviet in Baltic musical life and scholarship? What lies beyond the post-Soviet? Without dismissing the post-Soviet as a durable quality of social experience, *Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet* is an initial effort to address these questions in music studies. This volume brings together three generations of scholars and artists from the wider-reaching region of the Baltic, which includes and extends beyond Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Aas, Arnašiūtė, Davidjants, Gaidamavičiūtė, Jēkabsons, Joons Gylling, Kirsanova, Stanevičiūtė), Baltic diasporas (Pukinskis), and global Baltic musical spaces (Engelhardt, Garbes, Karnes, van Niekerk). The authors respond to how sonic histories of occupation (Skelchy and Taylor, 2022), the paradoxes of Soviet nostalgia (Boele, Noordenbos and Robbe, 2020), trauma and commemoration (Fauser and Figueroa, 2020), and the opening out of Baltic studies after the post-Cold War (Dai, 2018; Kelertas, 2006) onto the postcolonial (Annus, 2018; Koplataдзе, 2019) affect our work. In modelling future-oriented methodologies and artistic perspectives, the contributors here draw on diverse scholarly and creative traditions tracing their personal, intellectual, and creative engagements with Baltic musics in Soviet, post-Soviet, and broader worlds. Our interdisciplinary approach incorporates historiography and ethnography, cultural studies, and arts-based research methodologies alongside musicians' reflections on their practice. Music's intrinsic connections to temporality, identity construction and performance, embodiment and affect, and the political allow us to encounter what comes beyond the post-Soviet at a variety of scales, ranging from small Baltic communities to globe-spanning social and artistic movements.

Shape of the Volume

Despite being vital parts of expressive cultures animating social experience and politics, musical sounds and practices are, nevertheless, underrepresented in research on emerging Baltic realities. *Baltic Musics Beyond the Post-Soviet* fills this gap, emphasizing the relational, relative, and particular over the post-Soviet or postcolonial as a universal position. To do this work the chapters and conversations range broadly, revisiting and rethinking masculinity and class (Aas) and futurist subcultures (Davidjants) in Estonian popular music; mythologies of the Singing Revolution in Lithuania (Arnašiūtė); regimes of 'post-ness' and presentism (Stanevičiūtė) and aesthetics, prestige, and politics in Lithuanian music (Gaidamavičiūtė); exile, musical heritagging, and return

in the lives of Estonia-Swedes (Joons Gylling); trauma tourism and outsider participation in Baltic choral festivals (van Niekerk); and the place of new music (Kirsanova) and traditional singing in contemporary Latvian (Jēkabsone) and Baltic (MacLaughlin Garbes) identities. The volume links local musical histories and scenes across the Baltic Sea region and global social and artistic movements to amplify how the local, regional, and global spatially articulate in Baltic musics. By historicizing the post-Soviet in musical practice and scholarship and resisting the colonized binary of Soviet/post-Soviet, we seek out critical, alternative encounters with the past and present.

The volume begins at a signature historical inflection point in Baltic musical life. In the section titled ‘Revisiting and Reassessing the Singing Revolutions,’ Živilė Arnašiūtė and Johann van Niekerk critically reframe the fixed narratives and overdetermined sounds of the Singing Revolutions to show how the post-Soviet condition is inconstant within Baltic lives and Cold War imaginaries. In her chapter, Arnašiūtė listens carefully to the generational ruptures in the Lithuanian rock music scene to show how Singing Revolution mythologies maintaining a binary of heroic resistance and traumatic domination are, in fact, more nuanced and ambivalent in contemporary Lithuania. While a post-Soviet worldview, which Arnašiūtė describes succinctly as ‘anything but the Soviet’ in terms of aesthetics and memories of occupation, is commonplace in Lithuania, those coming of age in the 1990s and later (including Arnašiūtė herself) are repositioning Soviet rock in a ‘new social imaginary’ (p. 35) beyond the post-Soviet. Through archival research and interviews, Arnašiūtė demonstrates how the twenty-first-century performance and consumption of Soviet Lithuanian/Singing Revolution rock recovers some artists’ and listeners’ ambivalence toward the necessarily political, resistant meanings mythologized in dominant cultural narratives. At the same time, Arnašiūtė resituates musical representations of Lithuanian identity and sovereignty beyond the post-Soviet, including ultra-nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-COVID vaccination and restriction movements. Arnašiūtė revisits the established meanings of the Rock March and Sąjūdis protests of the late 1980s while understanding some interlocutors’ reluctance to discuss those moments as part of their reassessment of Singing Revolution mythologies beyond the post-Soviet.

Writing from a trauma-informed perspective, van Niekerk revisits Singing Revolution narratives to consider the possibilities and limits of touristic, extra-cultural participation in Baltic choral traditions – and, by extension, the limits of trauma-centred scholarship and performance. In interviews with

dozens of amateur and professional Baltic choral singers and conductors, van Niekerk documents generationally specific experiences of national-cultural pride, nostalgia, trauma, alienation, and belonging through participation in Baltic choral traditions. Van Niekerk sets the complexities of these experiences, shaped by choral repertoire and individuals' investment in intra-cultural participation, against essentialist, historically narrow representations of the Singing Revolutions that drive touristic, trauma-centred forms of extra-cultural participation. While musical commemorations of trauma can foster empathy and understanding, van Niekerk cautions against their tendency to 'ventriloquize silenced voices' (p. 65) and brand Baltic choral traditions in a Cold War frame of victimhood and resistance. The Singing Revolutions become post-Soviet essentializations that ignore the historical depth and stylistic breadth of Baltic choral traditions. Van Niekerk amplifies 'alternative ideological and aural landscapes' (p. 55) in Baltic choralism to decentre the post-Soviet, showing how historical contingency and cultural complexity articulate in centuries of repertoire and practices.

Next, the volume pivots to sounds and scenes that have been marginalized in music studies. In the section titled 'Mainstreams and Subcultures Beyond the Post-Soviet,' Oliver Aas and Brigitta Davidjants establish frameworks for tracking the power of listener-consumers in the success and impact of Estonian popular music. Both chapters disrupt conventional characterizations of post-Soviet popular musical subcultures to draw attention to the complexities of ethnolinguistic, class, gender, and regional identities in these scenes of pleasure and community. In his chapter, Aas brings us to the intersections of pleasure, class, and masculinity in contemporary Estonian 'lowbrow' music through an analysis of Estonian digital media. The music Aas attends to, popular on YouTube and in spaces of working-class leisure in rural Estonia and, importantly, among economic migrants in Finland, gives voice to identities at once rooted in Soviet musical aesthetics and present-day experiences of non-dominant class positions. Throughout, Aas emphasizes the analytic value of fun in 'lowbrow' Estonian music – a strategy that works against stereotypical post-Soviet focuses on rural neglect, unemployment, alcoholism, and unattainable models of consumer culture for working-class men. By tracking fun in 'seemingly antiquated figurations of masculinity' (p. 107), Aas shows how working-class Estonian men are offered possibilities to identify neither as nostalgic for a lost socialist past nor as frustrated by the tides of 'Western' neoliberalism, but, profoundly, as 'getting on despite it all' (p. 103) in everyday lives that are not merely post-Soviet. Stylistically, the 'lowbrow' music

Aas listens to is strategically ‘folksy’ (associated with working-class spaces of leisure and consumption and not necessarily national) rather than ‘folk’ (associated with the metaphysics of national tradition, ethnicity, and dominant-class hegemony). Aas uses the ‘joy of the lowbrow – its bodily affect’ (p. 107) to situate Estonian masculinity beyond elite discourses of post-Soviet flourishing, dominant popular culture, and ethnonational authenticity in quotidian, historically expansive spaces of struggle, necessity, and fun. Neither serious enough to be nationalist nor hyperbolic enough to be parody, Estonian ‘lowbrow’ voices social positions that refuse facile categorization.

Drawing on the work of individual and collective memory as data, Davidjants’s chapter documents the influence of fan club culture as a mode of collective rebuilding and bond formation. In the chapter, Davidjants analyzes the longest running fan club in Estonia: the Estonian Depeche Mode Fan Club (EDMFK, founded in 1992). Through individual interviews, archival research in periodicals and advertisements, and lyric analysis, Davidjants provides a historical structuring of life in Estonia through the lens of the EDMFK in the 1990s. The group’s origins and developing constituency were able to offer connections over boundaries uncrossed in other ways of post-Soviet Estonian life. Davidjants highlights the EDMFK’s geographical footprint connecting fans in rural and urban environments; attends to the EDMFK’s overcoming of ethnic and linguistic boundaries by encouraging interaction between Estonian- and Russian-language communities; and shows how the EDMFK stood in contrast to post-Soviet Estonia’s strict gender roles by eschewing ‘beauty culture’ and ‘tough guy’ (p. 112) expectations among Estonian women and men. Davidjants asserts that the EDMFK is, surely, a fan club, but its impact and longevity have also established the community as its own subculture – one that points to modes of analysis beyond the post-Soviet. Davidjants advocates for oral memory as a primary source of historical data, recognizing that the relationship between personal and shared memory is, in itself, a complication of the collective experience that was crucial in the EDMFK’s formation, survival, and endurance.

Finally, the volume offers three case studies of re-encountering the contemporary presence of the past. In the section titled ‘Memory, Aesthetics, and Ideology Beyond the Post-Soviet,’ Rūta Stanevičiūtė, Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė, and Sofia Joons Gylling help us understand how the post-Soviet is periodized in historiography, critical musical reception, and heritagizing projects. In a historiographical reassessment, Stanevičiūtė, following Lithuanian cultural scholars and François Hartog’s ‘regimes of historicity,’ contextualizes the

post-Soviet past within four ‘dominant chronologies of transition’ (p. 154) in Lithuanian musical life since 1990 – post-Soviet, post-colonial, post-national, and presentist. Stanevičiūtė elegantly documents how these experiences and representations of time in music overlap and intersect by connecting each to specific artists and works, moving from Vidmantas Bartulis’s performance of *Mein lieber Freund Beethoven* (My Dear Friend Beethoven, 1987) and Algirdas Martinaitis’s *Serenada panelei Europai* (Serenade for Mistress Europe, 1999) to Lina Lapelytė’s, Vaiva Grainytė’s, and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė’s *Geros dienos!* (Have a Good Day!, 2013) and *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (2017). In the performance of these and other sounds, texts, and images, religion and spirituality, Euroskepticism, the branding of a ‘Lithuanian sound,’ anxieties over the climate catastrophe, the play or erasure of genre boundaries, and encounters with traditional musics beyond the Lithuanian all merge, amounting to a ‘critical rethinking of the concept of art and the status of the artist in society’ (p. 169). The plurality of these movements, Stanevičiūtė argues, give us a textured understanding of the transitions underway in Lithuanian music beyond the post-Soviet moment of the 1990s.

In her chapter, Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė positions the post-Soviet period of the recent past in Lithuanian art. With a particular focus on collaborative and multi-media works, Gaidamavičiūtė traces aesthetic and philosophical shifts in Lithuanian concert music, institutional support for new work, and communities of music makers and sound artists. The most formidable rift to appear in the years of post-Soviet transition was, at its root, generational, manifesting as philosophical and professional differences yielded the success of some composers and the slow fade of others. Gaidamavičiūtė attributes the increase of international opportunities and valuation of innovative, novel aesthetic practices to the success of composers who thrived in the transition period – music that worked in direct contrast to an older generation’s focus on honing and mastering a narrower or more contained sense of craft. She calls attention to shifting financial support as a significant driver of generational differentiation, recognizing that when the government was no longer the sole funder of artistic programming, the ideals and ideas garnering support splintered in parallel to their funding sources. Gaidamavičiūtė offers an extensive exhibition of repertoire from Lithuanian composers working at the time, highlighting the multi-sited influences for new works and the complex network of impact and support that continues to shape concert music across generational divides beyond the post-Soviet.

Taking ‘publicative cultural heritagging’ (*publikativt kulturarvande*) (p. 192) as an active process of constructing and mediating cultural artifacts and practices to a target group, Joons Gylling brings us into temporal and spatial worlds of diasporic identity (re)construction beyond the post-Soviet. At the center of Joons Gylling’s chapter are the songs of Mats Ekman (1865–1934), an Estonia-Swede whose work became central to the remembrance and reimagination of Estonian-Swedish culture after the late 1980s. Once contact with Western Estonian ancestral communities became possible for Estonia-Swedes who fled to Sweden in the 1940s, song, dialect, and trans-Baltic cultural spaces assumed new meanings relative to non-titular nationalities’ experience of Soviet occupation. Ekman’s songs were valued in the Estonia-Swedish community as documents of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century lifeways and dialects in Western Estonia. Older generations of Estonia-Swedes exiled in Sweden remembered Ekman’s songs into the 1990s, when new local community associations (*hembygdsföreningar*) initiated heritagging projects meant to reconnect Estonia-Swedish culture to its spaces in Western Estonia. Through archival research, ethnographic interviews, and as a musician participating in heritagging projects, Joons Gylling brings us to the 2005 publication of Ekman’s songs (*Prästn e vargskall* or *The Wolf Hunting Priest*) and the 2010 recording project of the same material. These media, Joons Gylling argues, bring us beyond conventional senses of the post-Soviet in that they are oriented toward the creative revival and relearning of a minority cultural heritage from afar and across ideological divides different from those of titular exile and diasporic communities.

Between each section of the volume, a conversation with an active, practicing musician counterbalances the more typical academically focused chapters. The conversations included in this volume were facilitated by co-editor Katherine Pukinskis and highlight the rigorous, relevant work of practicing musicians that establish their contributions as material crucial for viewing a full scope of Baltic musics. Their work of making – performing, conducting, and composing – music provides experiential data and context for understanding and situating Baltic music beyond the post-Soviet. Each manoeuvres across the blurred lines of research and practice to inform their work with – and in – Baltic musical spaces.

Like the contributors of the volume’s research chapters, the three interviewees represent a broad, complementary geographical distribution and connection to Baltic music. They are each active contributors to the continued shaping of Baltic musics in the contemporary world, occupying positionalities

both inside and external to historical Baltic norms. Each of these musicians are staunch supporters of new Baltic music and have built their professional careers on rigorous training and innovative practice. Laura Jēkabsone trained in Latvian music academies and conservatories as a singer and composer, but credits her exposure to Latvian folk songs and musical traditions as a child as the most influential shaping of her creative voice. Jēkabsone's compositions are also deeply tied to her knowledge and experience as a practicing singer, which in turn have catapulted her career within Latvia and her recognition abroad. Born in Latvia and currently based in Australia, violinist Sophia Kirsanova's career sits at the intersection of an Australian music conservatory education and a deep investment in Australia's Latvian diasporic community. Kirsanova's commitment to commissioning, premiering, and performing works by Baltic composers locally and abroad represents a common trend among young Baltic musicians of engaging widely with what and where Baltic music is heard. Heather MacLaughlin Garbes, a conductor and performer based in the United States, leads amateur Baltic diaspora choirs as well as the professional group Māgi Ensemble, which exclusively performs music by Baltic-identifying composers. Garbes also maintains the largest collection of Baltic choral music outside of the Baltic region at the University of Washington; her entry point into Baltic music comes not from a connection of heritage, but instead a long-standing commitment to research and practice with respect to the musical traditions of the area.

In the first conversation, 'The 'Kids' Are All Right – Choral Composers Beyond the Post-Soviet,' conductor Heather MacLaughlin Garbes offers an overview of the work of four Baltic composers from the standpoint of a conductor. In her work, analytical and musicological research are a necessary part of preparing a piece for performance. Garbes highlights the works of Latvian composers Ēriks Ešvalds and Laura Jēkabsone, and Estonian composers Pärt Uusberg and Evelin Seppar. Through a survey of their existing repertoires, Garbes takes an approach melding the practical and sonic, highlighting an aesthetic freedom and flexibility in this generation of composers that is difficult to hear in the works of their predecessors.

In the second conversation, Laura Jēkabsone details her own musical origins and throughlines of Latvian folk song, both historical and newly composed ('Latvian Folk Song – The Cornerstone of My Creative Work'). Jēkabsone's work lies at the intersections of her life as a performer, composer, and conductor, and she details how her upbringing shaped the sounds and styles she writes for her own ensemble, Latvian Voices, as well as the choral

pieces she composes for other groups. For Jēkabsons, the motion between Latvian folk song or old singing traditions and her twenty-first-century aesthetic is fluid and constant; it is often hard to tell where the ‘old’ ends and the ‘new’ begins in her work, which is a key contributor to her success.

In the third conversation, ‘Latvian Music in Transition, 1980–2000,’ violinist Sophia Kirsanova carves into the academic sphere of classical composition, detailing a selection of works for violin by composers from Soviet-occupied Latvia and Latvian diasporic communities. Kirsanova seeks out the space between research and practice, embodying that middle ground as musicological work informs programming and performance choices. In this conversation, she details composers who began their careers during Soviet occupation and continued their work through years of transition, documenting how cultural and political changes affected their careers. Kirsanova focuses on works by Latvian composers Aivars Kalējs, Pēteris Vasks, Maija Einfelde, and Indra Riše; diasporic composers Ella Macens and Sandra Aleksejeva-Birze, both located in Australia; and two new pieces that Kirsanova herself commissioned from Ēriks Ešenvalds and Linda Leimane, all linked together by a thread of what musicologist Ilze Šarkovska-Liepiņa calls ‘Latvianity’ (2014). Though Vasks was most directly tied to the term, Kirsanova weaves together a sonic fabric of the music of this time to trace evolution and continuity in compositional outputs. She supports her musicological work through interviews with musicians who comment on the transitions of institutional support and the impact of shifting financial resources during the years 1980–2000.

Each musician included in these conversations is, in some manner, a product of Baltic musical traditions and is also positioned beyond the Soviet-Baltic occupation ethos. These music-makers born and working beyond the time of occupation were inundated in their formative years by a model of the overt and distinctly Baltic as a way of counteracting the colonizing effects of the Soviet; they benefited from some practices, topical content, and values of the Soviet style of education without being beholden to them. In a sense, they are positioned to eschew the musical and scholarly pillars that marked Soviet occupation in search of a more individualized engagement with their personal lineages and histories. Jēkabsons, MacLaughlin Garbes, and Kirsanova each reveal a sense of inescapable Baltic-ness that is rarely a conscious recognition or direct engagement, but instead rests on cultural bedrock beyond the frame of occupation.

Envoi – Listening Beyond

If you assume that your view is the only view, or the universal value, or the contemporary view, or the view that is in fashion, or the latest view, then you cannot be in the disposition of listening or be capable of listening to what goes beyond your framework of understanding. So, in this sense, listening becomes an enormous challenge: how to humble your position, how to uncover your position when you have only learned to think and experience the real from inside the West? How can you receive and relate to realities and ways of thinking that do not belong to your framework of intelligibility? This is what I call decolonial listening.

– Rolando Vázquez (2018, p. 149)

Throughout these chapters, we read about how the post-Soviet was a world-historical moment in Baltic lives and is descriptive of conditions in which people listen, create, and research. The pastness and futurity of the post-Soviet, in other words, intermixes in Baltic musics: within common scenes, genres, and institutions and across different generations and scholarly and academic traditions, the post-Soviet is over or persists, depending on the positionality and politics of whom one asks. The crucial thing, as Kevin Karnes writes in his afterword here, is that Baltic artists and scholars are able ‘to examine and define themselves, to themselves and to others, in relation to the histories, stories, and aspirations they take as their own... *not to go back* to subjugation and terror, at any cost, ever’ (p. 229).

It is the co-presence and layering of the post-Soviet and perspectives beyond that inspire the decolonial moves, echoing Rolando Vázquez above, this volume makes – seeking out an as-yet-unnamed method of creation and research that is not simply ‘after the post-Soviet.’ Especially for those who resist or refuse the term, it is important to acknowledge that, in many arenas, the post-Soviet is a readymade keyword and a brand that grants artists and scholars access to spaces that might otherwise exclude them. As Samuel Goff comments, to subscribe to the post-Soviet when it is (no longer) a local concept is ‘to shine perhaps too bright a light on the role of the West in creating and curating a post-Soviet aesthetic’ (2018). In listening, writing, and making beyond the post-Soviet, this volume positions the post-Soviet as one of many interpretive and creative frames for Baltic musical life – a methodologically

sound, decolonizing attention to Baltic voices that begins not with Cold War biases but with humane expressions of experience and becoming.

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PART I:

REVISITING AND REASSESSING THE SINGING REVOLUTIONS

CHAPTER 1

Lithuania's Reverberating Singing Revolution and Generational Fissures Beyond the Post-Soviet

Živilė Arnašiūtė

The world's maps needed replacing at the end of the twentieth century as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dissipated into a motley assortment of independent states. Events leading up to the collapse of Soviet power in Lithuania occupy a special space in the nation's contemporary memories, imaginations, and mythologies. Commemorative occasions, usually focusing on patriotic victory and national freedom, are celebrated widely, and the historical events themselves remain an important topic of discussion for Lithuanians. One such reverberation is the Singing Revolution (1988–91), which fostered tangible political change via mass public gatherings. Events such as the 1980s editions of the Rock Marches (1987–1989 & 1996–1997) – a festival staged in multiple locations across Lithuania – combined performances with direct, pro-independence campaigning led by the Sąjūdis political organization. The myriad musical genres considered dissident, or at least politically critical, demonstrate that the alignments of music and political will were not exclusive to the Singing Revolution or the domain of rock music. The rock music scene, however, remains iconic because it established a sonic presence in pursuit of tangible political change through mass events and outreach across a broad swath of society, including underground movements and popular mainstream culture.

In this chapter, I explore an ongoing reckoning with collective transgenerational trauma as it manifests in both reverberating memories of Soviet Lithuania's rock scene from the Singing Revolution years and in changing trends in current rock and pop works. I look at how performers and audiences

navigated, via rock music, memories of the Singing Revolution based on circulating media coverage, documentary films, and political initiatives. These reverberations of 1980s Lithuanian rock are then contextualized with currently produced rock and pop songs that demonstrate two clashing kinds of aesthetics – a lingering post-Soviet concentration on imitating songs from the West, and the latest ('post-post-Soviet') retrospective exploration of Lithuania's sonic map. Finally, I discuss potential reasons for conflicting and co-existing socio-cultural currents in Lithuania in line with ongoing generational fissures and the collective processing of the recent past.

(Re)sounding Independence: Lithuania's Rock Music as *The Singing Revolution*

To this day, the memory of Soviet Lithuanian pro-independence rock as the key mass accelerator of the Singing Revolution is promoted and maintained in public discourse. The organizing tension in this section moves between ambivalent impressions of the Singing Revolution's performers and audiences. A slip of the gears – that is, multiple interpretations of sonic symbols – can occur at the performance or the spectator level. In 2016, the historian and frequent TV presence Alfredas Bumblauskas stated that 'not Song Festivals, but rock music has freed Lithuania from communism,' adding that the state's independence is tightly connected with a protest culture that is expressed through rock music (Vyšniauskas, 2016). It aligns with Ramanauskaitė's (2004, p. 76) observation that in 1980s magazine pictures depicting Lithuanian pro-independence events one could often spot the punks in coloured mohawks, although they did not desire to engage in overt politics. Rock culture's tendency to rebel is, thus, remembered as a pro-independence highlight in 'The Singing Revolution' virtual exhibition from 2020, which concentrated on Sąjūdis and Rock Marches (Singing Revolution Lithuania, 2020). Additionally, a 2023 exhibition 'Rock Riffs: Music in the Soviet Times' was promoted by claiming that 'Rock Marches' ... participants have repeatedly said that it was the last strike to the Soviet power,' and by inviting attendees to 'get to know the Soviet regime's fall in the sounds of Rock Marches' (Lrt.lt, 2023). Yet, Guntis Šmidchens (2014, p. 246) demonstrates that the first music event showcasing the forbidden Lithuanian tricolour flag was the choral concert 'Gaudeamus' performed in early July 1988 by seven thousand students. According to Tadas Šumskas (2010, p. 154) this concert was 'a catalyst of further revolutionary

events.' Indeed, only a month later the second Rock Marches gathered masses of people and dared to raise the still-forbidden flag. Nonetheless, late-eighties rock music had become, in the mainstream media view, *the* Singing Revolution of Lithuania.

The Singing Revolution remains a popular topic of discussion in Lithuanian media, which continues to produce news articles, radio and TV programs, and announcements of commemorative events initiated by local and émigré organizations. Throughout 2018, thirty years after the start of the pro-independence movement, the public service broadcaster LRT and private media channels frequently recalled Sąjūdis in connection with 1980s rock events. Prominent rock musicians such as Algirdas Kaušpėdas (from still-touring Antis [Duck] – also a colloquial term for a false newspaper report), Andrius Mamontovas (from Foje [Foyer]), and Saulius Urbonavičius-Samas (from Bix), reminisced about the Rock Marches and reflected on contemporary Lithuanian society and notions of freedom. This publicity resonated with renewed interest in bands from the late eighties, some of which, including Ramybės Skveras (Square of Peacefulness), recently resumed their activities (Žmonės.lt, 2018).

Such reverberations of Lithuania's Singing Revolution not only present late-eighties rock music as a symbol of national strength, but also preserve and cultivate pro-independence memory. In 2012, Giedrė Žickytė's documentary *Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją* (How We Played the Revolution) (2012) created an impression of rock as the main source of social unity, depicting the Rock Marches and its initiator Antis as its epicentre. The film was widely disseminated and endorsed by musicians, including the hip hop band G&G Sindikatas, whose leader Svaras (Pound) expressed hopes for Lithuanian society to continue living in a spirit of national unity (MeedFilms 2012). As performers like Svaras have risen to the status of patriotic figures, late-eighties Lithuanian rock musicians carry the bulk of the pro-independence legacy in the public eye. While Antis is the brightest rock phenomenon in the Singing revolution,¹ other bands also engaged in overt politics on the stage. For instance, in the 1989 Rock Marches the USA-based Polikaitis Family Group Dainava sang 'Aš čia gyva' (I'm Here Alive) and shouted that 'those of us in emigration are praying that God would give Lithuania freedom' (Venckus, 2014). Additionally, in 2018 the late eighties punk singer Nėrius Pečiūra-Atsuktuvus

¹ For more information on Antis and Singing Revolution rock see Martinelli (2017) and Šmidchens (2014).

(Screwdriver) released a new documentary entitled *Lietuva – tai jėga* (Lithuania is Power, here resembling the English meaning of ‘cool’) (*Lietuva – tai jėga*, 2017). The film documented the youth subculture called ‘*neformalai*’ (the non-formals) in 1983–1992 and their relationship with the rock scene and pro-independence politics. The film resurfaced the sounds of dormant or disbanded groups such as Genocidas Raudonajam Interventui (Genocide to the Red Intervenor), WC, Hidroelektra (Hydroelectricity), Foje (Foyer), and Pečiūra’s own Už Tėvynę (To the Fatherland). According to film reviewer Dambrauskas (2018), compared to Kaušpėdas from Antis and Samas from Bix, Pečiūra-Atsuktuvus is mentioned less often than the other performers of the late 1980s Rock Marches. In the 1988 Rock March, Dambrauskas (2018) continues, Pečiūra’s courageous texts were nevertheless ‘the most straightforward musical critique of the regime in Lithuania.’ Pečiūra also contributed to an Antis-cultivated culture of visual effects as his mohawk, with a painted symbol of Lithuania – the Columns of Gediminas – has become an iconic picture of the Rock Marches and the Singing Revolution (Kmita, 2016).

The twenty-first-century use of Singing Revolution-era songs signals a continuous pride in Lithuania’s determination to achieve state independence. So long as creating unity is the goal, the relevance of reminiscing about, re-viving, and resounding the recent past remains high. Beyond the hype of the 2018 thirty-year anniversary, such music resurfaces at concerts, in television broadcasts, and in music venues where audiences listen to still-active bands or hear cover shows of older repertoire. For instance, at the 2016 Music Association’s Annual Awards (M.A.M.A.), the electronica band Golden Parazyth performed a tribute to Teisutis Makačinas, a Soviet composer who paved the way for Lithuania’s electronica music scene (Lrytas.lt, 2017). More recently, in 2022, Vaidas Baumila covered the Soviet band Hiperbolė’s (Hyperbole) song ‘*Sugrižk*’ (Come Back). Baumila performed his rendition at the long-running LRT contest *Dainuoju Lietuvą* (I Sing Lithuania), a television program meant to select the best songs of Lithuania (Juršėnaitė, 2022). Likewise, Baumila’s hit ‘*Kunigunda*,’ released in 2021, was reportedly inspired not only by ‘Lithuanian forests, shamanism, witchcraft, and midsummer at the Babtynas manor,’ but also by the 1970s–1980s Soviet-era sonic echoes of Hiperbolė (Delfi, 2021b).

The memory of pro-independence music events has also become part of current nationalist and nativist streams of thought. In 2021, ultra-nationalist Far Right sentiments were evoked at the Family Defence March – promoted as the biggest protest concerning domestic politics since the Soviet dissolution, although the attendance estimates varied from 52,000 to a more realistic

10,000 (Bakaitė, 2021).² It denounced the ratification of the Istanbul convention, a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe. Months later, protesters against COVID vaccination and isolation procedures enacted a Holocaust ghetto scene to claim a parallel between antisemitic atrocities and pandemic-related movement restrictions (Bertašiūtė-Čiužienė, 2021). Protesters at such events alluded to the Singing Revolution and symbols of Lithuanian statehood – the tricolour, the coat of arms Vytis, and the Columns of Gediminas – to remind viewers of the country's desire to remain independent of external forces. At the Family Defence March, protesters appropriated the stage used for the Song Festivals – another important pro-independence event – and the Sajūdis meetings. Additionally, recordings of eighties rock, folk, and pop songs often provided the soundtrack for protests, frequently infringing copyright laws or dismissing the will of the authors or those in charge of their creative work (Lrytas.lt, 2021). Nonetheless, Romas Dambrauskas and Ovidijus Vyšniauskas – popular singers known since the Soviet decades – performed willingly (Kanevičiūtė, 2021). Such twenty-first-century protesters invoked pro-independence struggle and Singing Revolution music to show their disapproval of regulations from the European Union, whether about a human rights treaty or COVID management. Their rhetoric positioned the EU as the next iteration of the Soviet Union. The claim was that Lithuania had lost its power and given its independence away to a new centre, now based in the West.

As these examples show, the Singing Revolution's sonic symbols can be re-configured by performers and event programmers to point audiences toward multiple meanings. On the one hand, there is a specific, historical meaning: a celebration and memorialization of independence from Soviet rule coinciding with a presentist desire to remain autonomous. On the other hand, there is generalized meaning: these songs can mean a protest for protest's sake, or protest against adjacent state power, however and wherever configured. Such symbolism can and often does slip at the level of both the performer's intentions and the audience's reception. Some Singing Revolution songs or events carry implicit political messages as intended by the singer-songwriter or organizer, but other songs or events have such meanings assigned to them by audiences. Thus, the complexities of the historical moment leading up to the

² For more information on the latest discourse of the Far Right actors, including the Lithuanian Family Movement, see Ulinskaitė and Garškaitė-Antonowicz (2023).

Soviet collapse – as well as the presentist invocation of that moment – are constantly shifting.

Currently, media emphasize the highly political aspect of rock, but it is also necessary to discuss the shifting levels of relationship between music and politics. Strands of traditional Lithuanian folk music, contemporary classical music, and popular music genres all carried pro-independence meanings, yet the scale of their involvement with anti-establishment politics varied. Although Lithuania's rock music was not always at the forefront of protest and revolutionary moments, it is still closely tied to the Singing Revolution in public discourse. Upon closer examination, rock musicians involved in mass, late-eighties events believed that their personal striving for freedom was not automatically indicative of their political aspirations. Indeed, there is a critical distinction to hold here. On the one hand, songs can be encoded with implicit or overt political messages. On the other hand, songs can be politicized in specific extra-musical contexts. The first case concerns construction and composition – artistry imbricated with politics. The second case has to do with reception – audiences who are political. The general tendency to rebel and protest against the system was not always intended to be scaled up as nationalist, pro-independence agitation. Rock music indicated a sense of personal freedom, creativity, and self-expression that were part of an idealized lifestyle for those who participated.

Existing commemorative works retrospectively create a smoother narrative from what was a motley mix of priorities. Alongside sentiments for an independent pre-Soviet Lithuania, these rock events disclosed both a fascination with musical trends from the West and encapsulated a longing for total personal freedom. Ramanauskaitė (2004, p. 84) noticed that 'magical rock rites' often expressed the youth's civil position and 'complemented Sąjūdis ideas,' although the tricolour to them resembled a free individual, not only 'statehood.' Yet, such close interactions between music and politics did not result in a cohesive understanding of the freedoms advocated by rock music performers, industry professionals, and political activists. As Misiūtė (2010) mysteriously concludes, 'the 1980s rock music was not as closely tied to politics as it sometimes appears... Or as sometimes would simply wish to appear.' In practice, the rock music scene featured different registers of overt political engagement, where some separated striving towards personal freedom from national patriotism and overt pro-independence efforts. According to Bumblauskas, singer-songwriter Vytautas Kernagis is another 'clear leader' in music history next to Antis because Kernagis is 'a nation's constructor' and

'a link between the contemporary era, the Baltic Way, and the March 11th' (Vyšniauskas, 2016).³ To Oginskaitė (2009, pp. 430–1), Kernagis was 'identified with freedom' despite being accused of 'going backwards' by the *Sąjūdis* newspaper in 1989 for his lack of overt politics. Kernagis commented that the 'singing poetry is, indeed, moving the soul, which was big politics' in itself, specifying that "Šaukiu aš tautą" (I Call the Nation) is the [single] most open political song' in his repertoire (Oginskaitė, 2009, pp. 431). To Kernagis, whose legacy is commemorated by a statue raised in Nida in 2009, his music was not making 'revolutions, maybe only protests via music' (Kajėnas, 2011, p. 81). Despite these tensions, rock musicians, especially Kaušpėdas from Antis, Mamontovas from Foje, Urbonavičius-Samas from Bix, Pečiūra-Atsuktuvus, and Kernagis – some of whom still attract multi-generational audiences – became symbols of the nascent re-independent nation.

The negotiation of personal freedom and national independence was a recurring challenge for musicians at the time. Some artists speak of a co-existence with politics, or, alternatively, their attempts to pursue an artistic existence removed from political concerns. To illustrate this point, Robertas Čerenkovas (2018), the leader of *Ramybės skveras* (Square of Peacefulness), a famous rock band that attracted thousands of concertgoers, shared that 'there was an inner freedom that made you want to join with the [idea of the] Fatherland's somewhat total independence.' Some musicians supported the idea, instead, of protest for protest's sake. This resonated with their interpretation of the core ideals of rock: agitating against any dominant political system. According to Misiūtė (2010), the band *Trylika* (Thirteen) participated in pro-independence events but stressed the importance of not forcing rock music into the mould of a political tool, as it did not exclusively function as such. In other cases, bands rejected the conflation of a personalized freedom in music with political, pro-independence agitation entirely. The bandleader of Bix, Saulius Urbonavičius-Samas, supposedly claimed in *Atgimimas* (Revival) that 'the most important thing is a free human... there was nothing political about the Rock Marches' (Misiūtė, 2010).

Yet, the experience of mass song and the power of gathering created additional meanings. Despite artists' intentions, artists and audiences at charged events like the Rock March co-create meanings beyond a song's construction

³ Vytautas Kernagis, Antis, and Foje, performed in a large-scale event *Kažkas atsitiko* (Something happened) in 1986, a surprisingly well-attended concert that inspired Antis to launch the Rock Marches.

and its mundane reception via albums and modest live shows. The band Foje (Foyer) emphasized sentimentality and a personal journey through life. Their 1986 hit '*Laužo šviesa*' (The Bonfire Light) is still one of the best-known Lithuanian songs. According to the band leader, Andrius Mamontovas, the song is 'about loneliness and waiting,' but audiences began to associate it with revolution (15min.lt, 2018). It is claimed that politicians, noticing that audiences held hands during this song, came up with the idea of the Baltic Way, joining forces across all three Baltic states in 1989 and forming a human chain spanning 675.5 kilometres (Pozdniakovas, 2017).

Politics were more explicitly invoked when activists employed musicians' popularity and unruliness for more revolutionary purposes. The band Antis (Duck), famous for their rebellious charisma, were soon involved in direct political criticism. The main ideologue of the Sąjūdis political organization, Arvydas Juozaitis, stated that 'without Kaušpėdas [the Antis frontman] it was unimaginable that we would begin a mass movement. It meant that Antis had to be there' (*Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją*, 2012). Juozaitis is referring to 3 June 1988, when Antis band leader Algirdas Kaušpėdas, without his knowledge, was elected a member of the newly formed Sąjūdis political organisation (*Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją*, 2012).

Across the spectrum of intention and reception, quiet scepticism regarding the overlap of music and politics simmered. Pro-independence musicians such as Nėrius Pečiūra-Atsuktuvus (Screwdriver) became unwelcome among late-eighties punks, who accused him of conforming to popular expectations, which included involvement with Sąjūdis, Rock Marches, and television (Raibytė, 2009; Visockaitė, 2010, p. 133). In a *Mano Muzika* website interview, the band Kardiofonas (Cardiophone) stated that 'rock as a political poster did not stick with us. That was the sphere of Antis' (Zakarevičius, 2016). Some bands also cultivated detachment from wider socio-political events. Vitalis Kairiūkštis from the metal band Spicy Bits of Scandal described his relationship with the Singing Revolution apathetically: 'I never sang songs about independence, and we lived it through perhaps not knowing anything about it [laughs]' (Šustavičiūtė, 2011, p. 502). Referring to the Rock Marches, Gintaras Grajauskas (2008) from the bands Rokfeleriai (Rockefellers) and Kontrabanda (Contraband) focused on rivalries rather than pro-independence unity between musicians: 'We always were "aside," but we had the chance to participate a little bit...Rivalry started. It smelled not so much of money but fame. And we were simple guys who never saw such things [as important].'

Such notions of remaining 'aside' from the Rock March's political energy correspond to the view of music as solely a creative avenue. Generalizations about Soviet Lithuanian rock music as inevitably political and revolutionary, then, neglect the musicians who stayed devoted to personal and aesthetic goals rather than national and political ones. Shrugging off the differing levels of engagement with pro-independence politics produces a convenient 'us-versus-them' dichotomy, in which notions of (direct and indirect) resistance to the Soviet regime provide a source of pride in the face of national victimhood. It is clear from observing these opinionated twists and turns that Lithuanians have not stopped negotiating their former ties with the Soviet Union.

Decades After the Soviet Collapse: A Process of Generational Re(dis)covery

It is probably impossible to overstate how pervasive post-Soviet attitudes still are within Lithuanian society, however, such a condition is starting to loosen and wane. I use the term 'post-Soviet' to mean 'anything but the Soviet,' usually resulting in a Westward focus. Practically speaking, the post-Soviet impulse is expressed as a collective retreat from traumatic Soviet memories of occupation, annexation, exile, censorship, and everyday limits on freedom and movement. To this day, Lithuanians process Soviet-induced trauma that manifests in discomfort with Soviet-endorsed cultural objects, aesthetics, and tastes. Yet more than thirty years after Lithuania's Soviet exit, new generations born and raised in an independent state are beginning to reshape national consciousness and move beyond the post-Soviet mindset. Re-evaluating rock music's role in the pro-independence movement is part of a larger socio-cultural re-negotiation of the post-Soviet-ness that has coloured Lithuanian life after re-independence. Public opinion, led by the independence generation – those born or reaching teenage years after 1990 – is gradually making space for a new social imaginary that explores the Soviet self and investigates the unexperienced past. I extrapolate generational differences within the Lithuanian rock music scene based on proximity to traumatic experiences. In Lithuania's rock music scenes, it is possible to grasp conflicted, transitional moments where Lithuania's Westward-looking post-Soviet aspirations and the 'post-post-Soviet' embrace of a longer retrospective glance overlap and co-create.

A lingering sense of national inferiority in the face of the West and a fear of new Russian aggression trigger a reopening of the wounds amassed during the period of Soviet rule. Yet, Lithuanian society faces a divide in which one part of the population carries direct trauma and another part carries the indirect effects of Soviet occupation, annexation, forced exile, torture, and military action. According to Danutė Gailienė (2021, pp. 180–3), multiple generations bear cultural traumas but, as their effects gradually fade, the society develops a healthier self-awareness. The reindependence generation, who tends to approach all-things-Soviet with curiosity, is eager to understand the society to which they belong. Even Gailienė's (2021, p. 9) study on Lithuanian trauma was republished specifically due to a post-Soviet generation's demand. Indeed, its curiosity stems from holding a relative distance to a past otherwise known only from textbooks, commemorations, or family stories. This rift in experiential knowledge often worries older generations of patriots. For instance, the national initiative 'Forget Me Not' argued that young people do not effectively resonate with the traditional national symbols (the tricolour, Vytis coat of arms, and Columns of Gediminas) (Lrt.lt, 2014). A common concern is that public memories of historical events are disassociated from the human experience of pro-independence struggle, which could lead to ambivalence. This section discusses what the independence generation expresses while engaging with Soviet Lithuanian culture, ranging from curiosity to nostalgia and celebratory embrace.

To understand how the generational divide unfolds in practice, I compare the political status of rock during the Singing Revolution with the subtler aspirations of independence-generation rock. Beginning around 2010, teens and twenty-somethings filled the gaps between underground and flashy mainstream music. This space remained unclaimed throughout the mid-1990s and 2000s as most Singing Revolution-era bands split or returned to the underground, occasionally performing for fun. The mainstream – all that gets radio and television time – included rock bands such as Rebelheart, Biplan, and ŽAS, whose style turned in a more mellow direction to allow for wider appeal. Only Muscat's heavier guitars continued to draw some television endorsement, presumably due to the novelty of its women-only band members. The mid-1990s and 2000s mass rock events consisted mainly of rock operas, where pop or opera celebrities often took charge. Yet, in the years leading up to 2010, digital media and social networks enabled wider and more immediate distribution of new Lithuanian rock, undermining the idea of a single mainstream. Simultaneously, an increasing number of festivals and venues

hosted alternative gigs, raising the exposure of new rock musicians. Singing mostly in English, new bands such as Freaks on Floor, Colours of Bubbles, and Garbanotas (Curly) appeared at Lithuania's M.A.M.A. awards and performed at international festivals and showcases. Through linguistic absorption and stylistic mimicry, this trajectory resonates with a post-Soviet striving to emulate the West.

Still other rock bands started to sing in Lithuanian. Perhaps the most visible of these ensembles is the indie, electronic, punk band BA. (est. 2012) who enjoy unparalleled resonance among Lithuanian crowds and are often compared to Andrius Mamontovas. Projecting a grunge-infused sound world, BA. conquered both alternative and mainstream spaces with their leader Benas Aleksandravičius recently coaching singers on the prime-time television program 'The Voice of Lithuania.' His signature blond shaved head and unbothered gaze complements the sunken, bass-heavy BA. sound, emboldened by audacious guitar riffs, splashy cymbals, and ambient sound effects. Multicoloured vocals tangle, in minor stepwise motion, around the chorus of their latest single '*Purvo gerkle*' (Throat of Mud) as Aleksandravičius opens his stream of consciousness: '*Tu mane/Tu mane/Tu mane verti žeme/Tu man/Tu atrodai man/Pilna purvo gerkle*' (You [turn] me/You [turn] me/ You turn me into earth/You to me/ You seem to me/[As a] Throat full of mud). The song portrays a repressed and slow *jaunuolis* (young guy) that is hurting because '*srautas veikia/Ir jį paveikia*' (the stream is active/And affects him), thereby alluding to the inner struggle to keep essentially free from outside influences. Here Aleksandravičius's coarse chest timbre, with a tearing deep falsetto, keeps ringing in one's ears long after the last note.

BA. aims to be 'the guide of Lithuanian texts' in current music (Delfi, 2021a); and they, indeed, accelerated the use of the Lithuanian language among new bands. A recently founded post-punk band Akli (The Blind Ones) believes their popularity lies in their 'sincerity, and the feelings, screamed in Lithuanian words' (Giniūnaitė, 2021). However, its members say that for a long time, music in Lithuanian felt 'strange' and 'uncomfortable' because the band members listened to English songs growing up (Giniūnaitė, 2021). Until recently, Akli felt that 'song-writing in the native language was a taboo and English enabled them to express their thoughts indirectly, maintaining a feeling of safety' (Giniūnaitė, 2021). Similarly, raw garage rock and electronic synth band Egomašina (Ego Machine) (est. 2019) told me that it is 'much harder to write in Lithuanian and make it sound not as lame as songs on the television' (Lamsargis, Jakutis and Riauka, 2021). Egomašina strives for

a distinctive sonic identity – in their words, not as ‘cheesy’ as the rock music ‘from the past,’ mentioning some pro-independence bands (Lamsargis, Jakutis and Riauka, 2021). They link singing in Lithuanian with the sort of authenticity that resonates even with non-native audiences. Such an attitude is also embraced by BA., who have already toured across Germany, Hungary, Poland, and France.

Rock music of the independence generation typically focuses on personal experiences rather than political critique. Egomašina claims that they are not focused on freedom or ‘some politics,’ but are, rather, a reflection on a day-to-day ‘lifestyle’ – thinking ‘for themselves’ and staying clear from the ‘traps of television’ (Lamsargis, Jakutis and Riauka, 2021). Contrary to Soviet times, Egomašina continued, now ‘we are ourselves responsible for that which restricts us’ (Lamsargis, Jakutis, and Riauka, 2021). The band is also fairly cynical: ‘the shackles are much more sneaky’ because of ‘the assumption that everyone is free to do as they wish’; nowadays not everyone knows the way ‘to be aware of how you form your musical tastes, opinions, and values’ (Lamsargis, Jakutis, and Riauka, 2021). Despite generational differences, there is quite a lot of resonance between the core tenets of older and younger musicians: nurturing the freedom to think for oneself and making conscious decisions without the outside influences of the state or capitalism.

During our conversation, Egomašina mentioned their recent fascination with the 1980s Lithuanian punk rock band Sa-Sa, while the Soviet Russian band Kino (Cinema, Film) provided an inspiration for Egomašina’s stage set up: the drummer plays standing up. They added that, overall, ‘Soviet vibes, punk-like pieces, and the general darkness’ is something they resonate with (Lamsargis, Jakutis and Riauka, 2021). Similar to the band Akli, Egomašina resisted the music of their parents’ era, but curiosity eventually led them to the Soviet tracks that resonated with their inner core values. Several Soviet Lithuanian favourites are included in the soundtrack of their documentary *Distancija* (Distance), where most of the band members – also known for their BMX biking skills – tour Lithuania and meet with other BMX enthusiasts (*Distancija*, 2017). Additionally, the West and the Soviet are not the only sonic directions that Egomašina embraced, mentioning African and Japanese rock bands. Yet questions of what Lithuanian rock music means, how it exhibits dis/connections to Soviet culture, and who it is by and for, endure.

The tendency to look back at what it means to be once-occupied and once-Soviet is prevalent in other music circles. Pop, rap, and R&B music producers, as well as EDM DJs, have also embraced the visual and sonic aesthetic of

Soviet-era Lithuania. In 2022, a Lithuanian jury and LRT viewers elected an unusual song for their Eurovision Song Contest entry: Monika Liu's '*Sentimentai*.' It stopped a celebrated two-year reign of English language songs by The Roop – electropop musicians whose witty yet stylish audiovisual world closely resembles the British band Metronomy, especially its 2011 album '*The English Riviera*.' Meanwhile, performing in a halter-neck dress with a disco-ball-like sparkle, Klaipėda-born and Berklee College of Music-trained Monika Liu sang sentimentally in Lithuanian about longing for a former love. She referred to the dunes in Nida and painted a picture of standing on them while waving to seagulls as 'he' returned to the shore as black foam. The song's imagery is a reference to the Lithuanian folk legend 'Eglė, the Queen of the Serpents.' This style of songwriting is unusual for the independence generation and rather hints at Soviet lyricism, which glorified nature, immediate surroundings, and the fragility of nostalgic pathos. Her subtle grace, vintage glamour, and melismatic half-note runs (rivalled only by the Lithuanian Estrada diva Nelly Paltinienė) left many Eurovisionaries comparing her songs to the French *chanson* (Wiwibloggs, 2022), forgetting similar traditions in Russia and Eastern Europe. Her soundtrack, co-produced with Miles James from the United Kingdom, is also soaked in a retro aesthetic. Synthesizer sound effects evoke Soviet Lithuanian disco, a style that was recently reintroduced by local DJs and alternative music connoisseurs, ensuring a re-emergence of such 1980s songs as Janina Miščiukaitė's '*Amžinas šokis*' (Eternal Dance) and albums such as Teisutis Makačinas's *Disko muzika*.

Popular music now more than ever includes Soviet synths, Estrada glamour, and/or the Soviet-Lithuanian singing manner and speech. When, back in 2021, Vaidas Baumila released his award-winning hit song '*Kunigunda*,' I assumed that it was a cover of a song by a 1980s rock band such as Hiperbolė or Rondo. The instrumental outline involved a mellow mix of twenty-first-century pop beats and a rather straightforward guitar riff with only occasional splashes of electric guitar notes, transported straight from the 1980s. The most unusual aspect, however, was its lyrics that focus on the singer's daydream about a sweet Kunigunda, calling her a forest witch and *laumė* (a woodland spirit in Lithuanian folklore). Such an image would have been common in Soviet decades when pop songs were filled with celebration of folklore and poetic expressions of romantic infatuation. '*Kunigunda*' is a tribute to Soviet Lithuanian culture through the lens of today. It embraces older sonic and semantic heritages, while bringing them up to the standard of 2020s Lithuanian pop.

Fascination with Soviet Lithuanian culture is also reflected in visual trends. Alternative singers, bands, and producers including Free Finga, BA., Vitalijus Puzyriov-Vaiper, and Despotin Fam were among the first to use Soviet blocks of flats as a background for video clips and photoshoots. Before the mid-2010s such backdrops would have been unimaginable, given the lingering desire to bypass the Soviet and focus on Western aesthetics. Yet, nowadays, the youth buy sweatshirts imprinted with Soviet-built blocks of flats from the Duonelaitis brand – wordplay on *duona* (bread) and the eighteenth-century Prussian-Lithuanian poet Kristijonas Donelaitis. Young people pair them with Soviet Lithuania’s favourite sneakers from the Inkaras (Anchor) brand, which, first established in 1933, recently revived production. Similarly, the video clip by Jauti (Feel) and Gabrielė Vilkickytė for the 2022 song ‘Pražys’ ([It] Will Bloom) uses excerpts from the iconic 1977 film *Riešutų duona* (Walnut Bread). The music video extends the film’s storyline to the present day, showing the protagonists as an aged couple residing in the same Lithuanian countryside. Generations that matured in independent Lithuania are longing for reconciliation with the past. As Vitalijus Puzyriov (2022), known as Vaiper, believes, ‘there is no need to feel ashamed, purposely hide, and forget’ the Soviet Lithuanian heritage, but rather to ‘embrace it and change it into something inspiring, [filled] with a critical look, acknowledging the pain or joy, if there was such.’ Nostalgic sentimentality is one of the affective drives behind such references. Vaiper warns, however, that ‘pop culture always capitalizes upon sentiments and nostalgia and purposeless sentiments are always more evil than good’ (Puzyriov, 2022). Thus, by repurposing the inherited shame towards all things Soviet of their parents’ generation, current generations embrace Soviet-era traces, safely residing in surroundings within which they formed into adults.

And yet, since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Lithuania’s independence generation has become directly involved in activism. On social media, many claimed that this was the first time that they had perceived Russia as an actual threat to Lithuanian sovereignty, which, consequently, accelerated open solidarity with Ukraine. Many musicians who had previously used their social media to comment solely on music started sharing Ukrainian news stories and urged others to donate to the cause. On 12 April 2022, photographer Neringa Rekašiūtė (2022; Lrt.lt, 2022) uploaded a video of Ukrainian Stepan Charnetsky’s 1914 song ‘Ой у лузі червона калина’ (Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow) performed by Ukrainian refugee Elizaveta Izmalkova together



Figure 1.1. Vitalijus Puzyriov-Vaiper. Image credit: Eglė Hugo.

with 300 Vilnius locals.⁴ The song had gone viral weeks earlier as Andriy Khlyvnyuk from the Ukrainian pop rock band BoomBox performed it while standing in army gear in Kyiv (Andriihorolski, 2022). Soon after, on 28 April, prominent Lithuanian singers from several disparate scenes released a joint song ‘*Gal ne rytoj*’ (Perhaps not Tomorrow) under the ensemble name Lietuva Ukrainai (Lithuania for Ukraine) (Jarutis, 2022). Solidarity also resurfaced at the Eurovision contest where Lithuania’s representative Monika Liu avidly advocated for Ukraine and waved the Ukrainian flag in place of the Lithuanian flag at the finals. A day after the Eurovision final, where Ukraine’s Kalush Orchestra won an overwhelming majority of audience points, Monika Liu sang a remake of their song ‘*Stefania*’ together with Daiva Starinskaitė and the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre musicians (LNOBT, 2022). The

⁴ This ‘Stand Up for Ukraine’ project received the 2023 Václav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent.

song was viewed over 700,000 times on YouTube in the span of ten days. We will surely encounter more such musical solidarity as threats to the region's sovereignty continue.

Endings and Continuations of the Post-Soviet Impulse

Yet witnesses and participants in the pro-independence movement nevertheless remain skeptical of the re-emergence of Soviet Lithuanian music. In 2017, music journalist and publisher Dovydas Bluvšteinas, who was one of the organizers of the Rock Marches, was an outspoken opponent of the growing interest in an electronic music vinyl by Teisutis Makačinas that was originally distributed in 1982.⁵ The vinyl was re-discovered in 2010 by American DJs, who played it on New York's WNYU radio. Such a reawakening of an obscure part of 1980s Lithuanian music caught the interest of Lithuanian youth (Vyšniauskas, 2017). Bluvšteinas criticized the recording's financial endorsement by the Soviet state and its prescribed agenda to appeal to the Soviet youth, calling it an example of the 'absurdity of the Soviet cultural policies' (Raibytė, 2017). For Bluvšteinas, this tainted music should not be revived and celebrated. So then, what exactly stands in the way of moving past the pro-Soviet vs. anti-Soviet divide when it comes to evaluating pieces of music produced in Lithuania? Let us reflect upon how these fine-grained stories of ambivalent politicization in music can help us understand the complexity of Lithuania's present-day situation.

Contemporary Lithuania is still a partially post-Soviet state by way of possessing a mind-set of Soviet-induced trauma and victimhood. These past experiences remain the foundation for current conceptions of national identity. The society is still haunted by the memory of Soviet Russian domination. Thus, nationhood stands as a bulwark against threats of renewed trauma, violence, decreased personal freedoms, and isolation from the Western world. Maintaining a specific national image is also an attempt to compensate for a failure to acknowledge the Soviet regime's victims. For instance, Lithuanians and their children who survived the Stalinist exile and were allowed to return

⁵ Bluvšteinas expressed his views during a live music discussion and DJ set at 'Vilnis s01e02' – a podcast and DJ set series at the Kablys venue in Vilnius (Kablys+Club, 2017). A month later, another journalist asked a similar question to follow up on his ideas expressed at Vilnis S1E02 (Raibytė, 2017).

by 1963, were stigmatized and never properly integrated into Soviet Lithuanian society (Anušauskas, 2005; Vardys and Sedaitis, 1997). The remains of those that did not survive were usually repatriated, but only after the dissolution of the USSR. In the meantime, Russia never admitted to human rights violations or war crimes during the long occupation and annexation of Lithuania between the 1940s and 1990s. Furthermore, Russia actively attacks historical facts not only to deny suffering inflicted by the Soviet regime, but also to blame its victims.

Russia's persistent, vehement denials trap Lithuanians in an almost absurdist reality, in which truths are never secure. As cultural theorists Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka (1995, p. 133) state, 'through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.' This analysis applies to contemporary Lithuania, as the transformation from communism to liberal democracy left an indelible mark on Lithuanian society at large (Putinaitė, 2018; Mykolaitytė, 2016). In my fieldwork, I have observed widespread hesitance to critically engage with Singing Revolution narratives – to evaluate their transformational potential – and I have often wondered why. Philosopher and cultural historian Nerija Putinaitė (2018) argues that during Lithuania's transition there was 'a fear of losing oneself through transformation.... This is an indication of cultural traumas.' Perhaps my interlocutors fear that critical revision might negatively impact collective national memory. Putinaitė (2018) also argues that 'national rituals... are [cultivated] out of national insecurity.' She emphasizes, as an example, Lithuania's Song Festivals that serve as symbols of purely national identity, although aspects of the current format of the festival were developed during the Soviet period under its own cultural nationalism policies (Lrt.lt, 2018; Putinaitė 2019). Putinaitė is an advocate of rethinking the national(ist) constructions of collective beliefs, and this sometimes turns against her. For instance, in 2016 her Patriot's Prize was revoked by the Minister of National Defense Juozas Olekas (Pancerovas, 2016). Olekas claimed that her latest analysis of pro-Lenin works by the celebrated poet Justinas Marcinkevičius showed a lack of patriotism, saying that 'this is the difference of younger and older generations... what our generation read [in Marcinkevičius's work] was freedom' (15min, 2016). Nonetheless, the Patriot's Prize has been completely discontinued since then.

Putinaitė's persistent questioning of fundamental narratives of independent Lithuania resonates with the conclusion drawn by Česlovas Laurinavičius

and Vldas Sirutavičius (2013, p. 421) that ‘myths define how we should... behave’ and that ‘Lithuanians evaluate their victories not according to an objective reality but rather a projection of a vision towards a reality, made by one or the other myth.’ These ideas about myth and projection correlate with the reluctance I faced from my interlocutors. While contacting those who were present at, or participated in, many of these pro-independence events, some expressed discomfort and inquired whether their contributions would remain anonymous, as if they were still subject to Soviet censors or retrospective punishment. Others desired to gain complete control of my scholarly narrative and were concerned about their words being twisted to fit a particular political agenda. The pushback against researching this topic climaxed with one interlocutor’s claim that the Singing Revolution is entirely a myth. Some of my interlocutors reverted to accepting the truth/myth duality of Soviet social life. Such reactions suggest that the extent of the musical role in revolutionary politics of the time remains a sensitive topic and that certain streams of present-day society wish to guard and propagate particular narratives for the sake of preserving national unity.

After all, as Aurimas Švedas (2013, p. 327) says, the Lithuanian nation is living in ‘a besieged fortress’ where its ‘national identity is a value *par excellence*’ that demands ‘an active defence against outside [forces] and inner threats.’ Distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘others’ has a direct heritage in the Soviet Lithuanian mindset, which established a separation between the foreign-influenced government and the imagined ‘pure’ Lithuanian society. As sociologist Rasa Balockaitė (2006, p. 4) puts it, the worry is that ‘set free from Soviet oppression Lithuania does not have its own cultural language, vivacious cultural tradition, upon which it could articulate everyday experiences’ as values of both Soviet and independent interwar Lithuania feel ‘outdated.’ This claim correlates with the existing desire to lean on cultural objects and collective memories that seem to define Lithuanian identity as separate from and immune to a Soviet one. Such worry has affected contemporary understanding of connections between politics and rock during the Singing Revolution and the beginnings of re-independent statehood. Such worry has also fuelled further fascination with the West, manifesting in mimicry and an embrace of English-language music trends so long as they signal departure from the Soviet past. This creates a patriotic but self-conflicted society that hesitates to challenge narratives that tell of Lithuanians’ successes against foreign powers.

Conclusion

Lithuania's Singing Revolution could hardly be imagined today without the rock music scene. It represents a widespread form of rebelliousness against the norms of society. The rock genre could, indeed, draw large crowds and spread political ideas widely across Lithuania. Some bands and audiences made explicit demands for freedom in both the individual and political senses. When one looks at the period more closely, though, the late Soviet scene features a complex interplay between musical and political events and forms of public participation. Distinctions between what is 'purely' musical versus political are muddled. Large-scale events such as *Kažkas atsitiko* (Something happened, 1986) and *Lituanika* (1985–88) convinced the broader society, emerging political organizations, and the Soviet government itself of the appeal of rock music among mainstream audiences. Once rock music began to attract the masses, a new festival, the Rock March, took off, touring across the state. Its political potential, initially linked with the Lithuanian Cultural Fund, soon attracted the emerging Sąjūdis movement. The Rock March was both a festival and political meeting, thereby becoming a symbol of the Singing Revolution. Yet rock bands, including those participating in Rock Marches, had varying investments in politics and activism. Nevertheless, such festivals and rock music as a whole tend to be generalized for the potential energy they contained, an energy which could be channelled toward freedom from Soviet rule only by the deliberate strategies of politicians.

The social role of music is undeniable, and it is important to understand how various genres of musicians, writers, filmmakers, and artists contributed to the political changes that were brought about. Rock indeed captivated Soviet Lithuanian society, as crowds gathered to see provocative bands on the stage. However, rock music's potential to protest, express freedom, and gather crowds, however, does not necessarily indicate pro-independence goals. Public discussions of pro-independence politics and rock music distort the record on structural levels. Focusing on (musical or personal) freedoms and protest as part of pro-independence resistance minimizes the larger socio-political urge towards change, even within the Soviet Union. Consider, as an example, the *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies (economic and political reforms in the mid-to-late 1980s in the USSR), which introduced greater freedoms into everyday life, encouraged social activism, and energized the transformation of the command economy into a capitalist market.

Thirty years into independence, intergenerational differences also shape these mythologies. While the Western values of capitalism, individual liberty, and freedom of speech were naturalized for the independence generation, their parents both learn from and resist it. For instance, the independence generation mainly grew up hearing the working and lower middle classes say that ‘it was better [to live] next to the Russian’ anytime the economic situation was tough. Today’s anxieties over multifaceted accounts of events like the Singing Revolution reveal a still-present inheritance of Soviet-induced trauma, which guides the unfolding of national historical narratives. Lithuanian culture still holds on to myths of nationalistic unity during the Singing Revolution. It still frets over Lithuanian ties to Soviet music, sounds, and objects. Yet the end of the post-Soviet era is closer than ever due to the independence generation’s curiosity to explore Soviet Lithuania’s artifacts and its overall legacy, sometimes quietly imprinted upon currently accepted socio-cultural behaviours and tastes. They feel entitled to replace fears of occupation with exploration of the trauma and its consequences to the multifaceted collective self. An increasingly inclusive, more complex, and less deterministic view of Lithuanian music and the Singing Revolution is starting to gain momentum. Time will tell where exactly it will take us.

With each passing decade, Soviet-induced traumas seemed to be slowly healing – at least until Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Generally speaking, the independence generation cultivated an introspective hope to enhance collective national self-esteem, which was brutally suppressed during forced relocations, exiles, or straight-out murders over the span of the twentieth century. Now, as Lithuanians witness Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, traumas of the past are reactivated. Independence generations are starting to resonate with the fears and experiences of their families. The fear pauses processes of reconciliation and triggers a survival mindset – us versus them, democracy versus dictatorship, heroes versus villains. After all, one cannot rip the band-aid off at the same time one is getting (re)injured.

Playlist

<https://sptfy.com/Balticmusicsone>

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CHAPTER 2

The Singing Revolution and Trauma Tourism: Toward an Ethical Approach for Extra-Cultural Participation in the Baltic Choral Tradition Beyond the Post-Soviet

Johann Van Niekerk

This chapter outlines parameters for ethical participation in the Baltic choral tradition as visitors engage Baltic worlds beyond the post-Soviet. The narrative of the Singing Revolution and the mass events of non-violent resistance through music in 1987–91 serve as popular entry points for non-Baltic performers and researchers into the region’s choral tradition. Yet this narrative, with its complexities and layers of meaning, includes embodied performances and commemorations of cultural artifacts linked to forms of trauma. Engaging with such narratives as outsiders ultimately produces a form of trauma tourism, with effects that echo those of more tangible forms of trauma tourism. Drawing from research on trauma, trauma tourism, and ethical tourism, as well as a growing body of musicological research on performed commemoration and pain, my chapter suggests ways forward for ethical, extra-cultural participation. These suggested routes do not foreground the Soviet or post-Soviet era but rather contextualize those periods within larger trajectories within which a frame beyond the post-Soviet emerges for visiting and visited performers alike. The implications of this research are relevant for all forms of social justice and socially conscious cultural exchanges.

My chapter oscillates between Baltic choirs’ participation (hereafter referred to as ‘intracultural’ participation) and engagement and exchange by choirs from outside the region (hereafter referred to as ‘extra-cultural’ participation). Russian and Soviet scholar Samuel Goff insists that ‘ultimately, the “post-Soviet” is about people. We have to let them populate the frame. Every

site that we might look into from outside ... is the sum of local and global stories ... and has been lived in for longer than we've been paying attention' (Goff, 2018). It follows that Baltic worlds beyond the post-Soviet must be oriented toward the futures that Baltic people create for themselves. To this end, I draw on collaboration and interviews with Baltic musicians, composers, conductors, and singers to represent their views on the Baltic choral tradition in general, the Singing Revolution in particular, and their views on visitors' extra-cultural participation.

Background

James and Maureen Tusty's documentary *The Singing Revolution* (2006) made a significant impact on the international choral community. The feel-good story of an Estonian nation that 'sang itself free' attempted to demystify the Cold War-era in the Baltics for an international audience and served as a bridge connecting choral conductors and choirs to the region. The term 'Singing Revolution,' coined by Estonian artist and politician Heinz Valk (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 3), narrates and mythologizes non-violent resistance through collective singing in the Baltics during the last years of Soviet occupation. The past fifteen years have witnessed a trend of Singing Revolution-oriented choral tourism in the Baltics. These tours operate through the frame of this brief, significant period in Baltic history. In the years immediately following the film's release in the United States, choral conferences featured viewing parties of the film and provided guidance for hosting such parties in attendees' hometowns. Amateur choirs and professional vocal ensembles continue to program Singing Revolution-themed concerts, while television and radio in the United States focus on the Singing Revolution narrative as a utopian example of the power of music.

Typically, choirs visiting the Baltics perform repertoire that was meaningful during the Singing Revolution, with a few cursory nods to more contemporary works from active composers. They visit the sites of the song festivals, internment buildings, museums of the occupations, and other historically significant locations. The phenomenon of Singing Revolution choral tourism freezes experience within a peculiar post-Soviet position. Samuel Goff claims that Eastern Europe is useful for the West because the region combines familiarity with the exoticism of past and present ideological conflicts: 'Rather than a space of imputed otherness, they are a space of imputed ambiguity' (Goff, 2018).

Situating the Singing Revolution

The Singing Revolution may appear to some as a fairy-tale; the narrative is an appealing one. In spaces characterized by violence, polarization, and systemic injustice, the appeal of commemorating a successful non-violent resistance movement through music can inspire confidence and remind people of their deeply held values. The narratives and myths of the Singing Revolution attest to the power of music as a vehicle for organization, communication, and cultural formation. Choral singers may feel an affirmation and validation for their art form by visiting the Baltics, where choral singing is a ritualistic part of cultural identity, and the awe-inspiring scale of the song festivals is gratifying for participants and non-participating visitors alike.

Yet, an emphasis on the Singing Revolution situates the actions and imaginations of choral tourists within a post-Soviet frame, foregrounding a brief period of resistance at the expense of the millennia-old cultural heritage and traditions of Baltic peoples. Moreover, this emphasis essentially freezes understandings and approaches to Baltic choral culture in a post-Soviet moment, making it difficult to encounter alternative ideological and aural landscapes. Without intentional decisions otherwise, engaging with the resistant narrative of the Singing Revolution centres the post-Soviet in thought and practice.

While social-justice-based choral tourism is not unique to the Baltics (tours of South Africa with its histories of totalitarian control and struggle through song come to mind as a parallel example), such an approach has the effect of creating a Saidian Other that is frozen in time and cannot be contemporary. This form of tourism encourages the visitor to view those they encounter through the lens of victimhood, a lens that may manifest in cultural exchanges as a perception of audiences as victims, recovering victims, or descendants of victims. This approach, of course, is not a balanced one. The oversimplification of a narrative where song triumphed over steel simplifies a complex, nuanced, and intersectional cultural form that has evolved over millennia. Collective singing has formed a foundational component of Baltic identity that operates largely independently from the relation of Baltic peoples with oppressive systems and eras.

Collective singing in the Baltics is indeed remarkable, and the song festivals are worthy of admiration, emulation, and international recognition, as was given by UNESCO in 2003 (UNESCO). Not all visitors intentionally or actively adopt problematic approaches, and there are certainly those who relate to the region as one would any other place – with a limited contextual

understanding and touristic naïveté independent of an awareness of the Singing Revolution. Latvia, a self-proclaimed ‘nation of singers,’ invited almost 500 choirs from seventy-three countries to visit Rīga for the World Choir Games in 2014. As this was essentially a competition where choirs showcased their national repertoire and non-Baltic repertoires, the event serves as an example of extra-cultural engagement with Baltic spaces without the framing of specific cultural or historical contexts. But what happens when engagements with narratives of social justice, commemoration, and the Singing Revolution intertwine in scholarly and musical practice? Can the joy and pride channelled through these narratives be separated from trauma? What happens in the commingling of joy, pride, and trauma? I turn now to seldom-discussed issues in Baltic contexts to offer an approach to Baltic musics beyond the post-Soviet and beyond choral singing.

Cultural Trauma, Performed Commemoration, and Trauma Tourism

The term trauma is derived from the Greek word for ‘wound’ and refers to a distressing experience and its accompanying emotional shock. Trauma may continue in various manifestations long after the initial event. When music is involved, trauma may refer simultaneously to past violence and its repercussions as experienced through ‘reembodied, sonic, or spectral presence in commemorative performance’ (Fauser, 2020, p. 8). A view of trauma as continuing injury elucidates another function of trauma tourism, that of a search for healing and reaffirmation of a sense of heritage and humanity. The Baltic song festivals with their music that addresses collective cultural trauma through direct reference, indirect inferences, and coded layers of meaning, as described later in this chapter, can be understood as such a practice – an institutionalized ritual and yet a personal form of healing for those who experienced Soviet occupation. Yet, this sense of heritage can be quite complicated, and is not experienced uniformly by all participants. While striving towards the mental and cultural liberation of a ‘post-post-Soviet’ practice, participants may nonetheless evoke a nuanced sense of nostalgia for the past, including so-called traumatic eras, such as that of Soviet occupation in the Baltic states.

Even the most cursory of glances at Baltic choral music with commemorative significance reveals elements of suffering, resilience, and trauma. The once forbidden Lithuanian song ‘*Kur giria žaliuoja*’ (Where Forests Stand

Green) embodies a melancholy of cultural loss and a desire for autonomy and belonging: ‘The song speaks the words of Fatherland’s fate, its bittersweet melody saddens the heart... to Fatherland I wish happier days...’ (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 202). Estonian choral songs acknowledge death directly, such as choral settings of Juhan Liiv’s ‘*Ta lendab mesipuu poole*’ (He Returns to the Beehive): ‘And thousands shall fall by the way; thousands are still coming home and to trouble and care...’ In some, violence is depicted in literal and horrifyingly detailed ways, such as in the harrowing second verse of Rene Eespere’s ‘*Ärkamise aeg*’ (Song of Awakening): ‘With sword, with fire, came a foreign man, bringing pain, wickedness, eating people’s bread. Dad was killed, Mommy too, Brother too, still a child; the whole land flooded, soaked in tears’ (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 190). Yet, in much of this music, acknowledgment of trauma and a sense of hopelessness is followed by more dynamic, hopeful depictions. The latter verses of the Latvian song ‘*Pūt, vējiņi*’ (Blow, Wind) counter previous verses of slander and collective ‘gaslighting’ and reclaim a sense of agency and independence. And in a particularly powerful metaphor, the song ‘*Manai dzimtenei*’ (To My Homeland) insists that ‘... through our beating hearts broken pines *will* grow’ (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 179).

The relationship between Baltic people and Baltic choral music is not monolithic; it is influenced by age, lived experience, and socio-cultural factors. Considering music as a site of trauma does not negate other meanings, and spaces that hold profound meaning for people, including their own life stories, may nonetheless still be representations of trauma. Some scholars even defy the use of the term and the application of its perceived neo-liberal, Western connotations to Soviet, and non-Soviet Baltic contexts (Cizmic, 2012, p. 22).

In the context of Baltic choral music and music performed during the Song Festivals in the era of Soviet occupation, this music evokes C. Wright Mill’s concept of the sociological imagination. Singers were not merely singing songs, but were undoubtedly aware of the many political dimensions of their participation, as evidenced by interviews with participants in the film *The Singing Revolution*. The music from song festivals was twisted into Soviet propaganda, yet, as described later, contained many elements of rebellion and revolution through coded layers of meaning, while situated in a time of collective experiences of traumatic events. The range of possible trauma-inducing events, characteristic of life in the Baltic states during the Soviet-era, is vast and difficult to fathom: the film describes the impacts in great detail, ranging from the fear of dissent, punishment, deportation, death, and the paranoia of

constant surveillance and a political mechanism that could turn on its citizens at any moment (*The Singing Revolution* 2006). It is this memory and sociological imagination that for many is connoted with any event where Baltic choral music from Soviet-era song festivals is sung.

While the levels of individual trauma for Soviet-era Baltic citizens, or acknowledgment thereof in the first place, differs from person to person, it is undeniable that systemized violence can affect groups of people, their collective identity, and the way they tell their history. The field of psychotraumatology and its interest in the Baltic region is growing after the reclamation of independence in 1991, and an increasing number of longitudinal studies have been published in the last two decades (for an overview of traumatic stress studies in the Baltics, see Kazlauskas and Zelviene 2016). While it is a seemingly impossible task to evaluate the extent of the connection between individual trauma and performance of music within the Baltic choral tradition, the term ‘cultural trauma,’ defined by sociologists Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman (Alexander et al., 2004) as a mixture of the personal and collective as a socially constructed phenomenon, allows for a treatment of larger themes and approaches. Music as embodied or performed commemoration encompassing cultural trauma positions music as a site of memory that contains components of heritage, identity, pride, joy, uncertainty, resilience, and trauma. Maria Cizmic delves into this complexity in *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (2012), which outlines how musical works bear witness to traumatic events. Cizmic (2012, p. 3) argues that musical works serve to perform the psychological effect of trauma, loss, and recovery as a public conversation regarding suffering, remembrance, and mourning. In the case of extra-cultural performers, Cizmic investigates how music creates a point of entry into an empathetic response to another’s pain, acknowledging the inherent dangers of aestheticizing suffering in the process.

To gauge the views of intracultural participants in Baltic choral music and perceived manifestations and dimensions of cultural trauma, I interviewed thirty-eight participants via teleconference in 2020. In terms of demographics, nineteen participants were born after 1987, eleven were born between 1957 and 1987, and eight were born before 1957. Participants’ gender identities were distributed more or less evenly, with 21 identifying as women and seventeen as men. 20 participants were from Latvia, ten from Estonia, and eight from Lithuania, and all indicated that they did not speak Russian as their home language. The majority primarily considered themselves as singers (thirty-two) and six primarily as conductors. Five singers participated in both amateur

and professional ensembles, whereas the other thirty-three participated exclusively in amateur ensembles (volunteer basis, auditioned and non-auditioned).

My interviews ground these inferences relative to trauma studies, cultural trauma, trauma tourism, and commemorative performance theory. Responses shared with me acknowledge the positives of an interest in Baltic culture and history and the complexities of non-Baltic performers' touring and song festival participation. Three significant themes emerged. First, for many younger singers, the COVID pandemic created a rare vacuum without the presence of foreign groups and preparation for the national song festivals. This interruption in the status quo reinforced a strong desire to gather and sing together in person and *en masse*, and a sense of relief at not being required to work on the overly patriotic and emotional music frequently required of intracultural and extra-cultural choral exchange. One singer shared: 'Due to COVID restrictions, this is my first year without "Pūt, vējiņi" (Blow, Wind). Without "Gaismas pils" (Castle of Light). Those songs are important. But they always look back. We want to look forward.'

Second, a generational divide was apparent with younger singers acknowledging the importance of the music commemorating long-standing traditions and a complex history but favouring modern compositions with non-patriotic themes: 'The new music, the fun music, that's what you'll see at *laulupidu* [Estonian Song Festival]. Let's sing the new music, the new composers. But not "Muusika" – spare me the *silmavees* [tears].' Older singers who experienced Soviet occupation expressed a more urgent need to perform and remember the complex layered patriotic music despite the emotional labour or residual trauma that may accompany it, whereas some younger singers were concerned about the psychological toll the music took on those that were there during 'Soviet times':

I can sing these songs. I can sing them without too much concern, because I was not there during those years [of Soviet occupation]. The words and the music mean a lot to me, to my tradition and identity, but I don't feel it as strongly as my parents. But my mom, when she comes to listen, at first she likes it. But always after, there is sadness. And anger. And memory. I understand, she lives that way, she was there. But I don't want that, unless it's *Dziesmu Svētki* [Latvian Song Festival].

Finally, many expressed a form of nostalgia for the days when collecting patriotic songs served as a unifying force for cultural identity and nation-building while acknowledging that this music can reinforce an unwanted ‘othering’ of Russian speakers, a concern especially evident in the younger generations of singers I interviewed. Some singers even acknowledged a complex form of nostalgia for ‘Soviet times,’ and one particular correspondent vehemently disagreed with the very line of questioning around trauma, stating of her first experience of the Estonian song festival during Soviet occupation: ‘I was a child. The song festival was exciting. My family was there. The music was so beautiful. It was my first experience. I don’t look back in tears. I wasn’t traumatized – maybe I was too young to understand. But of course, I cannot tell people this.’

These responses closely echo the functional representation of cultural trauma described by Cizmic (2012, p. 15), who interprets representations of cultural trauma as sets of value systems having four distinctive functions: addressing the nature of reality; assigning moral responsibility; grounding collective identity and memory; and establishing who is allowed to share in a particular social identity. She admits that:

the negotiations that arise around cultural traumas prove to be contentious, as different groups disagree about the nature of pain and its social meanings, at the same time though, such processes allow for a possible widening of social understanding – even people without direct experience of the original trauma can connect to a past traumatic event and participate in a related collective identity

The generational divides around choral music of the past and future is understandable, as generations have divided tastes in music. But where music is represented as a simplified manifestation of monolithic culture, the situation is complicated. Annegret Fauser claims that performance can become an expressive means to ‘render previously unheard voices audible’ but warns that this performance ‘can also subvert them by replacing one victim with another, erasing injustices through carefully curated memory regimes’ (Fauser, 2020, p. 2). While a bodily co-presence exists (using a definition by Fischer-Lichte) between performer and spectator, it ‘indexes the very bodies whose absence forms the centre of the performance’ (Fauser, 2020, p. 6). In the case of large

public acts of commemoration, however, these bodies are not absent, and frequently present on the stage or in the audience.

The choral music tradition and its repertoire is undoubtedly an important component of Baltic cultural history and identity. The dualities mentioned above derive from the lived experience of those inside the culture who musically negotiate the positive and negative presence of the past while striving to move beyond the post-Soviet. In general, commemoration is a cultural necessity and a core need for humans. Kay Kaufman Shelemay (Shelemay, 2020, p. 264) argues that it ‘resolves the primal anxiety that individuals, as well as the communities of which they are a part, will be forgotten over time.’ Commemorative acts are not merely retrospective and a form of archive, but are future-oriented. They serve as an intergenerational connection and are especially powerful when embodied through performance, cultivating first-hand experiences for participants in commemoration (Shelemay, 2020, p. 265). For people in the Baltics, song festivals are a connection to statehood, an independent identity, and serve as a performed archive of cultural history that resists the silencing of cultural memory.

Navigating Dualities: Intracultural and Extra-Cultural Participation

Navigating extra-cultural participation within such a complex cultural archive requires another acknowledgment in that such activities, if mishandled, could be construed as a form of trauma tourism. Trauma tourism is an arresting, paradoxical term. Trauma is associated with what people wish to forget, avoid, or overcome, whereas the tourism industry largely appeals to potential travellers with pleasing aesthetic images of light-hearted, enriching travel. The relationship between trauma and tourism points toward a complex alignment of opposites; a duality complicated by embodied commemoration. Laurie Beth Clarke coined the term ‘trauma tourism’ to capture the tensions between pain and pleasure and between trauma as sacred and tourism as profane (Clarke, 2009, p. 174). Clarke draws from previous attempts at a definition by A.V. Seaton, Brigitte Sion’s ‘thanatourism,’ Maria Tumarkin’s ‘traumascapes,’ Lucy Lippard’s ‘tragic tourism,’ and Malcolm Foley and John Lennon’s ‘dark tourism’ (Clarke, 2009, p. 174).

These terms attempt to explain the significant numbers of global travellers who visit sites of atrocity while also acknowledging the positive effects of tourism such as job creation and positive socio-economic impacts on local

populations (in some cases). Those connected to the tourist trade learn to live with these sites through education, humour, and a jovial pragmatism that may seem incongruent to visitors but is vital for the visited. The psychological and semantic impact of trauma tourism also differs based on socio-cultural connections between the identities and lived experiences of visitors to trauma sites. Performers from different backgrounds experience these sites differently, especially when performing embodied memories and narratives through music. This signals the increasing need for contextualizing social justice or activism-based tourism around the world.

It follows that cultural outsiders' participation in choral music comes with great responsibility and difficult decisions. Would a pedagogy for engagement seek to commemorate the totality of contexts surrounding a musical work? A pictorial example from the United States may serve to illustrate such a pedagogical approach, one that has implications for social-justice or activist-based choral tourism regardless of geographic location. The famous 1965 march by Civil Rights activists across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama was extensively documented, and images of this event are well known around the world. The choice of focus mirrors that of a socially conscious pedagogy for choral performance: do we celebrate the inherent truth and courage that compelled the marchers to cross the bridge in the first place, or do we focus on the institutionalized state violence and brutality that awaited the marchers at the other end? Could the act of this march embody both these contradicting emotional qualities and commemorative aspects?

If music serves as embodied commemoration, certainly the onus falls on the performer to acknowledge this complexity, or similarly, to acknowledge a negotiation with these dual qualities. In a Baltic context, for example, the penultimate stanza of the beloved '*Saule, Pērkons, Daugava*' (Sun, Thunder, Daugava) originating from a 1989 school children's festival characterizes the duality that lives within music and those who sing it: 'Water of life, water of death, flowed into the Daugava. I touched the water's surface, I feel both in my soul: water of death, water of life. We feel both in our soul' (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 192). A sea of difference exists between intracultural and extra-cultural expressions. While Latvian children may be able to sing about the complex duality of waters of life and death, a culturalization barely comprehensible to a visitor, it may be much more difficult and problematic for non-Latvians to embody these complex sentiments through performance, and their participation may indeed lead to interference in the complex act of commemoration. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia refers to two aspects inherent in all forms

of communication, the first aspect a systematic communication that creates exactly repeated sets of meanings and the second a communication that features extensive alterations and adaptations of meaning that may be infinite (Bohlman, 2020, p. 50). This latter aspect is mainly known to intracultural participants and is only available to extra-cultural participants through study and engagement.

Intracultural and extra-cultural choral performance in the Baltics featuring music of the past exists in a liminal space, a 'non-correspondence of two times, two histories, two mentalities' (Franko, 2015, p. 497). Liminality refers to a space that is 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967, p. 95) and it is this in-betweenness that may connect and serve as a better basis for an empathetic understanding, which in turn may help set the parameters for ethical extra-cultural interaction. The extra-cultural observer/participant cannot assume that all participants are closely connected or situated to the various meanings and heteroglossia of Baltic choral music. Meanings, contexts, and inferences are in constant flux and understanding and interpretation differs between generations and individuals. In his books *Forest of Symbols* (1967) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Victor Turner draws on the work of Arnold van Gennep as he defined the concept of liminality, based on the Latin *limen* or threshold. The concept of liminality may help to explain the in-betweenness and ambiguous space that is created wherever the music of complicated cultural heritages resounds. Liminality is necessarily ambiguous. Victor Turner states that 'As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture' (Turner, 1967, p. 95). Singers for whom the music of Baltic song festivals evoke complex meanings of nostalgia, fear, paranoia, and cultural pride would necessarily have a different experience of this repertoire than those who do not have such connections, or more importantly, were not taught such connections. If we are to follow the inferences from the expressions by singers of younger generations, an acknowledgement of this liminal space presents an opportunity for a movement into something new. Turner states that 'Jakob Boehme, the German mystic whose obscure writings gave Hegel his celebrated dialectical "triad" liked to say that "In Yea and Nay all things consist." Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner, 1967, p. 97). In the case of music from Baltic choral repertoires, this sets the

scene for something new to arise, possibly for a significant cultural migration into the realm beyond the post-Soviet.

The necessity and importance of music and commemoration as coping mechanisms in the Baltics are necessarily important; whereas victimhood can be characterized by silence, large-scale sonic commemorations make voices audible to reclaim a sense of previously lost agency. It is important to note that musical performance and commemoration may foreground and certify certain experiences of trauma as worthy of commemoration, in effect, silencing other voices in the process, including those who wish to move away from its original contexts. In our interviews, a younger Latvian singer reflected: 'This music, it makes you think about what the Russians did. Okay, the Soviets. But I have Russian friends. We cannot live in this country and keep talking about what they did wrong. What their parents did wrong. This music, it feels like it fights the battles of my parents and their parents.'

Music and commemoration in the Baltics may then be seen to continue the trajectory of overcoming the post-Soviet with its implied reference and relationality to the Soviet era, and as a reclaiming of identity and truth. Margarita Mazo (1996, p. 385) writes of people in the former USSR that '...as facts and values of their past were increasingly documented as false, a kaleidoscope of references to the arts of the whole world, past and present, helped to redefine their values, reconstruct their self-identity, and find a new sense of belonging and community.' In fact, the music of the Soviet-era song festivals and Singing Revolution has always contained elements that resisted a positioning in relation to the Soviet, especially as works that originated in the period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* started to reflect the possibilities of freer speech and that which could be expressed freely. The use of folktales and cultural idioms permitted by Soviet authorities was a vehicle to 'live within the truth' (from Vaclav Havel's essay 'The Power of the Powerless,' quoted in Šmidchens, 2014, p. 5), further increasing the 'power of the powerless' (Havel, in Šmidchens, 2014, p. 160). For younger generations wishing to move ahead, the truth in this case may be a desire for movement to new semantic and semiotic attachments, embracing a new meaning and function for this repertoire and associated moments of commemoration.

Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein expresses that 'our common ground is to be found less in the convergence [of images] than in the unbridgeable space that holds them apart' (Buck-Morss, 2008, p. 31). The clichéd notion of music as a universal language may deceive participants into ignoring the in-betweenness of touristic encounter, whereas understanding the impact of ethnocentric

desire informs a more nuanced form of ethical interaction. The participating observer may sense the distance between these positions through acts of commemoration. These acts differ from re-enactments in that distance does not collapse temporalities; the ‘DNA’ of its original conception is still present but presented within a continuing trajectory of layered meanings and contexts, influenced by the heteroglossia of the dynamic meanings. In negotiating Baltic choral repertoire, returning to Eisenstein’s ‘common ground,’ it is in acknowledging the negative space, with lack of universally-agreed upon context that we are allowed any kind of semiotic movement to new meanings and interpretations.

Where, then, with such divergent mental attachments and agendas present within intra-cultural participants, is the extra-cultural participant to start their approach toward non-harmful encounters with Baltic choral music? How may the visitor oppose the tendency to ventriloquize silenced voices or impose their own agendas and endeavour instead to address asymmetry within commemorative and re-enacted trauma? Why not simply avoid the topic completely and merely focus on music that has been created outside of periods of profound traumatization? Frequently, cultural exchanges are undergirded by empathetic desires for connection or meaningful interaction. Empathy is, after all, a critical tool in feeling a sense of sameness that can lead to compassionate action, and working towards empathy is a worthy human goal. The realities of cross-cultural interaction may, however, confront visitors with what Hazel Tucker calls ‘unsettled empathy’ that calls on participants to ‘sit with uncomfortable legacies of colonialism, slavery, genocide, and displacement from which no destinations are exempt’ (Terry, 2020). The practice of ‘unsettled empathy’ as preparation for cultural exchange presents a responsible approach that can transform Singing Revolution-based tourism into Singing Revolution-informed tourism. There are, of course, limits to empathy as a basis for compassionate ‘global citizenship.’ In a *National Geographic* article titled ‘Travel is said to increase cultural understanding. Does it?’ Nathan Thornburg argues that empathy is essentially impossible ‘in its purest form’: ‘I can weep for you, but I can’t weep as you’ (Terry, 2020).

Many critiques levelled by Richard Slimbach in his book *Becoming Worldwise* may be applied to the context of Singing Revolution-based choral tourism. The cultural and individual traumas of Baltic peoples (using the earlier-mentioned definitions by Cizmic) may be ‘subconsciously perceived to be there for voyeuristic “consumption” as part of the overall experience’ (Slimbach, 2010, p. 79). The danger of aestheticizing suffering is present in

narratives of the Singing Revolution extolling ‘those qualities we miss in ourselves or our homeland’ (Slimbach, 2010, p. 78). Slimbach argues that ‘our reflex is to observe the hardship of others’ lives and then come away feeling “blessed” or “lucky” that divine providence or fate has permitted us to be born in privileged circumstances, and not as one of those “made to suffer”’ (Slimbach, 2010, p. 79).

In recent years, an emerging body of research on ethical tourism, global citizenship, and mindful travel has emerged focusing almost exclusively on the power dynamics and dimensions of interactions by people from privileged communities with populations of less privilege in terms of economic and often, political power. This research is informative but does not address intercultural exchange across Cold War imaginative distances, especially in the Baltic states where this relational difference in privilege is not necessarily applicable. The locus between studies on ethical or mindful tourism and post-Soviet and post-post-Soviet theory presents an opportunity for unsettled empathy. By acknowledging the distance between participant and observer and the distance between participants of the Cold War generations and their descendants, authentic communication and approaches may occur. Acknowledging, but not assuming the presence of heteroglossia in the *intention* of participants as they engage with this music, may furthermore enhance this authenticity; in the words of one younger Lithuanian singer interviewed: ‘For my parents some of these things we sing about are all symbols of some sort. But for me, sometimes a mountain is just a mountain, and not a complicated symbol or metaphor.’

In the case of extra-cultural participation in the Baltic choral tradition that does not limit itself to a focus on the Singing Revolution, different opportunities present themselves. A meaningful avenue of encounter comes by contextualizing the Singing Revolution as just one part of Baltic cultural identity, a single component of its musical heritage. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous TED talk ‘The Danger of the Single Story’ features the following insight:

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story (Adichie, 2009).

Along this path, Guntis Šmidchens (2014) locates Baltic music in its broadest context, contextualizing songs of the Singing Revolution along ancient routes. Opportunities for engagement with Baltic choral music beyond the frame of the Singing Revolution are, indeed, plentiful. The revival of pagan songs and other expressions of intangible heritage serve as alternative entry points into empathetic participation in Baltic choral music. The *sutartinės* or circle songs of Lithuania, performed in ethnographic open-air museums, showcase deeply historical origins of the Baltic people. *Dainuskapis*, the ‘song closet’ of Krišjanis Barons with its almost three hundred thousand folk songs placed at the centre of the Latvian National Library, itself named after the song ‘*Gaišmas pils*,’ is evidence of song’s central position in Latvian identity. Further north, the *regilaul* or runic songs of Estonia represent how music transfers knowledge orally from generation to generation, including more recently constructed mythologies and national epics.

Conclusion

It is clear that an ethical approach to extra-cultural participation in Baltic choral traditions must acknowledge the limits of non-harmful, ethical engagement with trauma and its narrativization, expression, and commemoration. Performing commemoration and embodying histories of trauma come with responsibilities, and an empathetic approach must acknowledge the responsibilities and limits of what can be achieved, as outlined in this chapter.

Further research is needed to view longitudinal trends within intracultural participation. Consequently, data gleaned from extra-cultural participants would illustrate the dynamics of intercultural exchange in Baltic contexts. Further research at the intersections of ethical tourism, trauma studies, extra-cultural performance, and socio-political difference is needed as well. While it is essential to acknowledge the distances, dualities, boundaries, and liminalities presented in this chapter, Baltic choral traditions have always veered toward unrestrained and unlimited futures. Fortunately, in some cases the text itself can serve as a guide to move beyond the post-Soviet, beckoning us ahead. ‘*Manai Dzimtenei*’ (To my Homeland) (Šmidchens, 2014, p. 179) breaks free from the realms of pain and perseverance, of ‘beating hearts’ and ‘broken pines’ and ends with the charge: ‘New mornings call us onward to new paths. Toward eternity, singing, we shall go.’ Ethical engagement requires extra-cultural participants to follow suit.

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CONVERSATION I

The 'Kids' are All Right – Choral Composers Beyond the Post-Soviet

Heather MacLaughlin Garbes

Interviewed by Katherine Pukinskis

Q: Your work exists at the intersection of research and practice; each part of your professional life seems to inform or influence the other. Could you speak a bit about these elements and the ways that your research influences practice and vice versa?

I have been told by many conducting mentors that I 'think too much' and that I should allow the music to come to me organically, but my curiosity always makes me want to research more. I have always been very interested in the 'why' and that has led me to continue to research and perform regularly. I think that deep research is necessary to inform honest practice, but that practice will also give new insights into research. It should be a balanced relationship to allow both elements to enhance each other. To prepare and perform music from a specific region or culture takes on a great responsibility of understanding the history, context, and traditions. I have felt from the beginning of my studies that learning the language and culture of any piece and its composer was an integral part of honouring the music.

Q: What are the kinds of themes or questions you consider in your work?

As the next generation of 'beyond the post-Soviet' choral composers emerge and become more internationally well known, what are the influences on and trends of their work? In the past, the focus of research and programming has been on the traditions of the Soviet conservatory as the model of musical learning, and the influences of music education and training on the ways

people make music; as we move further away from that time, emerging, external influences are helping propel Baltic composers to create innovative new works, but still with strong ties to those who came before them.

Q: Who are some composers who embody these trends?

For the conference that inspired this conversation, I examined the works of four living composers from the youngest generation of established, widely known musical traditions in the Baltic states: Ēriks Ešenvalds and Laura Jēkabsone from Latvia, and Pärt Uusberg and Evelin Seppar from Estonia. All four composers were born within a ten-year span (1977–1986) towards the end of the Soviet occupation. Their childhood and early adulthood happened during the post-Soviet time of awakening; they straddle the unique transition point of being brought up in the old Soviet system of music education but also having the freedom to explore and learn about the world's music and traditions. It is because of this juxtaposition that many of their compositions use traditional folk elements as a foundation, but with creative harmonic or rhythmic elements to craft a more modern sound.

These composers are experiencing an international recognition generally not afforded to their Baltic predecessors. Ēriks Ešenvalds is the most well-known composer from the region due to the performance of his composition 'Northern Lights' at the 2013 American Choral Directors Association National Conference in Dallas, Texas. The performance of this work on a national platform in the United States made Ešenvalds' compositions very popular for collegiate choirs, which catapulted his reputation in the international choral community as well. Pärt Uusberg has become a leader in the Estonian choral world and is currently the artistic director for the 13th Youth Song and Dance Festival which will be held in Tallinn in July 2023. In addition to the influence and contribution of Uusberg's compositions, the artistic director position provides the opportunity to exert administrative pressure over the field of Estonian choral music as well. Laura Jēkabsone has made her name not only as a composer, but as the founder of the women's a cappella ensemble Latvian Voices, which has performed throughout the world and was a featured ensemble at the 2013 Latvian Song and Dance Festival. Evelin Seppar's works are not as appropriate for song festival repertoire due to their intricate rhythms and harmonies, but her works are now being performed in Estonia and throughout Europe and the United States.

Q: What did the process of information gathering look like?

I collected a general catalogue of their works and then categorized them by five different components: choral genres, voicings, language, commissions and location, and analytical function. These components were chosen to investigate the influences in compositional form, the ensembles that are commissioning these composers, and other influences in compositional structure that might be present. Music for choir covers a wide style spectrum in the Baltic nations, so it was important to differentiate between concert-choral, folk, a cappella, and sacred styles, but noting also that these compositions can be more than one genre, cover multiple movements, or belong to a larger work.

Voicings are also important in Baltic choral repertoire because many composers from this region write advanced repertoire for not just the traditional mixed choir (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) ensembles, and this practice has been a hallmark of repertoire from this area. Choirs of all voicings (treble, low, and mixed voices) are respected by these composers, in contrast to the more historical views that low-voice and treble-voice ensembles should function as training ensembles for the mixed choir. Choice of language and text source is also a focus when considering how far-reaching these compositions can become. With the advancements of technology, resources for unfamiliar languages are available via YouTube performances, video calls with composers and native language speakers, but lesser-spoken languages, such as those from the Baltic region, can still be an initial barrier to less-experienced conductors and their ensembles. Baltic composers are thus also choosing to write not only in their home languages, but to set texts from international sources in a variety of languages. This language choice allows these pieces to become more accessible to all choirs, especially when the text is in English.

Q: Where is this information stored? How easy is it to access?

I found much of this repertoire through publisher's websites and was then able to purchase and download scores easily. Musica Baltica, based in Rīga, and the Estonian Music Information Centre are two wonderful resources. The University of Washington (UW) also has a Baltic Choral Library collection with over 1400 titles of scores, recordings, and books. The UW Baltic Choral Library continues to purchase new compositions as well as procure items from other libraries and collections.

Q: Let's start with Ēriks Ešenvalds, who has significant recognition in choral communities outside Latvia.

Ēriks Ešenvalds is perhaps the most internationally well-known composer of this survey. His compositions have been performed throughout Europe and the United States and have also been featured at major choral competitions, festivals, and conferences. In an analysis of 146 of his compositions, mixed choir (SATB) voicings were predominant, with 11% being treble only (SSAA) and 2% only the lower, TTBB voicings. The compositions by Ešenvalds and Jēkabsone analysed for this document were those available through Musica Baltica Publishing and are not the complete catalogue of their works. Mixed choir (SATB) is the most common type of choir voicings throughout the world, but writing in both SSAA and TTBB, along with arranging some of his works for multiple voice combinations allows more ensembles to be able to perform his music. His text sources are quite varied, with many in English. I believe that this, along with his innovative harmonic ideas, is one of the reasons that he has become so popular. Non-Latvian choirs may have tendencies to not sing in Latvian if they feel they do not have strong resources to properly learn the nuances to the language, so Ešenvalds's choice to use English as often as he does in his compositions has helped his works be more accessible in the wider choral world.

As an example of how using English text makes compositions more marketable, Ešenvalds's composition '*Dveseles dziesma*' (Musica Baltica Publishing MB 1353, MB 1768, MB 1266, MB 2869), which was performed at the closing concert of the 2013 Latvian National Song Festival is also now available under the title 'Sing for the Peace of the World' (Musica Baltica Publishing MB 2094). Although the text has some of the same themes, Ešenvalds chose two different authors for the same musical setting.¹

¹ Latvian poem by Anita Kārklīņa, translation by Heather MacLaughlin Garbes, and English poem by Māra Sinka.

“Here is Ešēnvalds’s ‘*Dveseles Dziesma*’/’Sing for the Peace of the World’ (4th verse), with Latvian text translation (left column) by Heather MacLaughlin Garbes and English text (right column) by Māra Sinka.

It sings, my soul sings.
Silently, through thousands of voices.
God is singing in my soul,
which is overpouring with starlight.
Burns, my soul burns like a milk jug
in a clay oven. It burns in Latgale.
My song shines, my song prays,
My song loves in Latvia!

Sing for the peace of the world,
Our song spreads love and healing.
Pray for the peace of the world,
with all your care and feeling.
We are so different, and yet we all need
peace and love and kindness.
Love like you’ll never forget you can
change the world.
Help one another, trust one another,
love one another, change the world.

Choosing a completely different text instead of creating a singable translation that might *also* not relate to choral singers outside of Latvia is a forward-thinking and entrepreneurial mindset on Ešēnvalds’ part. This type of practice has allowed Ešēnvalds’ works to be regularly programmed outside of the Baltic region.

Q: How does this particular business mindset differ from Ešēnvalds’ predecessors? What were the opportunities or restrictions for composers writing during the Soviet occupation?

During the Soviet occupation, texts had to be approved by the government, and unusual combinations of instruments or voices were not encouraged. Creative work was funded and financially supported exclusively by the government. Additionally, Baltic composers were not making music for consumption or performance outside of the Soviet purview; they were artistically and creatively cut off. The composers of this younger generation, however, have much more freedom to choose their texts, styles, voicings, and accompaniments. They can freely explore new concepts and combinations of elements, but they also no longer have the guarantee of publishing or payment as government funding has become more flexible. Composers are now learning the balance of being creative with the marketability of what will sell and what will be something that choral conductors will program for their ensembles.

Q: You mentioned at the start that each of these composers is very much composing in the present, but nods to their nation's traditions. What about Ešenvalds' own style sets him beyond the post-Soviet, but still recognizing his musical lineage? Are there frictions between the two?

The post-Soviet composers' watermark is their innovation of revolutionizing the folk song traditions with contemporary harmonies, rhythms, instrumentation, and voicings. When I speak with post-Soviet composers, most share that they are greatly influenced by the folk songs that they heard as a child even if they don't use them as an explicit foundation in their compositions. Many talk about how singing traditions, especially the singing of folk songs, is so ingrained in their everyday life and their being that they can't delete it from their compositions.

I do think that there is a bit of friction with the older generation as they may feel that the new arrangements are not honouring the old traditions; many times, it is the initial shock of change and the new versions are slowly appreciated. One example of this is the new arrangement of '*Pūt, vējiņi!*' by Latvian-Canadian composer Imants Ramiņš. This arrangement was premiered at the 2008 Latvian Song and Dance Festival to some mixed reactions but since this time, it has become well known and loved throughout Latvian communities worldwide.

Q: You also mentioned Laura Jēkabsons. Can you talk more about her background and career?

Laura is an innovative and creative composer from Latvia born toward the end of the Soviet occupation in 1981. Influenced greatly by books and stories, Jēkabsons focuses on telling stories through her music (Jēkabsons, 2020). For this survey, I analysed 29 pieces of approximately 100 (~30%) that were available through Musica Baltica Publishing. Of those compositions, 68% were written for SSAA (treble) voices, 31% for SATB voices, and Jēkabsons also has two works for TTBB ensemble. Jēkabsons is also the founder of Latvian Voices, a professional a cappella group. Started in 2009 as a female a cappella ensemble, they added a bass voice in 2020 to become a mixed a cappella ensemble. The repertoire of Latvian Voices is internationally known due to its balance of challenging parts for women's voices along with energetic rhythms and Latvian folk song traditions. Many conductors of women's ensembles have shared that they are very excited to have found challenging repertoire for their SSAA ensembles that also have a wonderful cultural story and tradition. Jēkabsons's substantive career and practice with Latvian Voices has smoothly

transitioned into her professional career writing for other treble voices and ensembles. Many times, composers will write for a mixed-voice, SATB choir and then will revoice those pieces, if requested, for either treble- or bass-voice ensembles. Jēkabsonsone is known for composing for specific ensembles, such as Mixed Choir MASKA, Latvian State Choir, Rīga Project Choir, the Rīga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA, and The Real Group, 2020).

Q: What do Jēkabsonsone's pieces sound like? How does her voice fit in the lineage of Latvian composers but also as part of this new generation of 'beyond the post-Soviet' composers?

Laura Jēkabsonsone's choral works can be categorized into three groups: choral, a cappella, and folk. In the choral category, the compositions are homophonic, homo-rhythmic, and many have chorale-like sections. The pieces may have instrumental accompaniments, and the vocal lines have text connected to them throughout the composition (as opposed to other styles where vocal sounds may be syllabic but not text-based, or timbral). For the a cappella designation, this style focuses on a more modern configuration of singers where smaller ensembles are featured and some of the vocal lines emulate other, non-voice musical instruments. Vocal lines in this style will often omit lyrics and instead feature syllabic accompaniment, with driving rhythmic contrast to the melody line. Within the folk influence category, there are two qualifications: the folk song source or folk text topic, and the vocal quality in performance practice. Jēkabsonsone is a keen composer of songs that exist in multiple categories, with folk/a cappella as the most common in her catalogue.

Q: How do these styles come to co-exist in her work?

As storytelling is the main focus and goal in Jēkabsonsone's compositions, she takes inspiration and structure from many books and folk tales. One piece that was strongly influenced by literature is '*Div dūjiņas gaisā skrēja*' (Two Doves Flying), which is inspired by a Latvian folk song and the book *Meža meitas* (Daughters of the Forest) (2015) by Sanita Reinsone. In Jēkabsonsone's dedication on the score, she writes:

Dedicated to the "daughters of the forest." The composition is dedicated to all Latvian women who after the World War II got involved in the partisan movement which stood up against occupation and Soviet rule. Living in inhuman

circumstances for many years, in a state of constant fear, hiding and sacrificing themselves in the name of Freedom (Musica Baltica, MB 2372).

In an interview, Jēkabsone expanded on these thoughts:

I have read this book that is especially about the ladies, young girls, who went together with the men to the forest and lived there and they are true stories. Very tragic stories about how they raised children even in the forest and people died and children died and families died (Jēkabsone, 2020).

Jēkabsone sets the text by Lidija Kalcenava in a soundscape fashion, using jaw harp, vocal sliding between pitches, mummering sounds, aleatoric repetition, whispering, and at one point, the mimicking of the cry of a silver fox. Jēkabsone adds, for reference in the score, that 'Silver fox is one of the most sensitive animals. It can sense an approaching stranger from a 1 km radius' (Musica Baltica, MB 2372).

Jēkabsone's focus on intricate and compelling stories, along with her extensive catalogue of SSAA (treble) compositions creates a vibrant energy around her work as she continues to become more internationally known. Jēkabsone's innovative compositional style may come from not having formal conservatory training in composition, which allows her to be more exploratory and organic in her writing. Her balancing between composing and performing is a common thread with many of the post-Soviet composers, as well. The narrow focus of the Soviet training system, which required students to specialize in one area only, has been dissolved in this new generation such that many composers are also conductors, performers, and administrators. By taking on multiple roles in music-making, composition work can then be informed by practice- and administrative-based work.

Q: We've spoken about two Latvian composers so far. Do Baltic composers have a common sound or ideological artistic practice? Or do you see individual identities among composers of each nation?

Baltic composers don't have a specific sound that can be described in a few adjectives, but I do believe that there is a common foundational thread to their compositions. This repertoire has both a tremendous, grounded feeling

of strong compositional techniques, but there is also a creative and inspirational freedom. It is the combination of the foundation with the freedom that describes this music. I also believe that nature is a strong inspirational factor to almost all Baltic composers, and that particular inspiration is a unifying factor to both sound and rhythm.

Q: Who is Pärt Uusberg?

Pärt Uusberg has emerged as an Estonian composer who straddles traditional and contemporary music. Uusberg creates using Estonian text sources by many of Estonia's national poets, such as Ernst Enno, Marie Under, Jaan Kaplinski, and Juhan Liiv. He uses traditional compositional forms, but with modern treatments of harmony. He has composed predominantly for SATB ensembles with 21% of his works being written for TTBB ensembles and 12% for SSAA groups. Analysis of Uusberg's choral compositions was based on the pieces available through the Estonian Music Information Centre's website and are not his complete catalogue. Uusberg has received quite a few commissions, including from the Estonian Song and Dance Celebration, the Celebration of the Republic of Estonia 100, the Estonian National Library 100th Anniversary and the Estonian Choral Association. Being commissioned to write for many of the major celebrations in Estonia is a strong indication of how accepted Uusberg has become as one of the new voices for Estonian choral repertoire, and a reinforcement of where the choral sound is heading in Estonia. He has also been commissioned from ensembles in Italy, Finland, Latvia, and Canada, but may be limited in those due to using mostly Estonian texts. When asked about his feelings about commissions, he stated, 'My dream is actually to not write commissions at all. My dream is to be free to write what I want whenever I want and to take as much time as I like to complete it. Writing a commission and musically exploring an idea that comes freely to my mind are two very different feelings' (Tasher, 2017).

Q: The comment from Uusberg sounds like a direct counterbalance to Ešenvalds' practice. What does Uusberg's music sound like? Is the difference between these two composers ideological and aesthetic?

Uusberg's compositions are known for their meditative quality, many of which have a very slow harmonic movement. Uusberg shares about his compositional process: 'In a way I think that maybe it is not [a] good idea to talk too much about writing music. The beauty of composition is that you are really alone with yourself, meeting your soul and I would not like to put it into

words' (Tasher, 2017). Uusberg's focus on sacred texts, coupled with this sonic and ideological quality have made these compositions very popular in both sacred and secular settings. He has also become well known because of the programming of his compositions on the Estonian National Song Festival performances. In 2011, his piece 'Nad vaatavad üksteise otsa' (They are looking at each other) was performed at the XI Youth Song Festival, and both 'Lauldes' (While singing) and 'Mis on inimene?' (What is human?) were performed at the 2014 Estonian National Song Festival (Estonian Music Information Centre, 2023). It was the performance of his composition 'Muusika' (Music) during that 2014 festival that truly catapulted Uusberg to a household name in Estonia, and then into the choral world at large. Uusberg was named the Estonian Conductor of the Year in 2022 and served as the artistic director for the 13th Youth Song and Dance Celebration, which took place in Tallinn in 2023.

Q: It seems that Uusberg, in addition to his artistic presence in the current world of Estonian choral music, also has an administrative presence, then, a different kind of control or influence on what contemporary choral music looks and sounds like in Estonia. How do you see the trends of current Estonian festivals reflecting this more contemporary ideology or politics, as compared to, perhaps, Estonian National Song Festivals during the Soviet occupation or those early, post-Soviet years?

Uusberg is the artistic director for the 2023 Youth Song and Dance Festival, so he has a substantial influence on choral repertoire in Estonia. The upcoming festival is called *Püha on maa* (Holy is the Land) based on a poem called 'Valgust!' (Let there be Light!) by Estonian poet Hando Runnel. Using Estonian literature as well as sharing an interpretation of the text to be what is 'light' in both the spiritual and nature-based sense, Uusberg is influencing the younger generations of singers in Estonia to honour their traditions of literature, folk songs, and language, and to look ahead to their journeys in life. This juxtaposition of traditional literature with a contemporary analysis and viewpoint defines the newer generation of choral leaders throughout this area.

Q: What other composers are pushing the boundaries of contemporary choral music?

Composer Evelin Seppar is inspired by Estonian text and folk traditions, but also incorporates English text sources such as e. e. cummings, James Dillon,

William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.² Her Estonian text sources include Jaan Kaplinski, Viivi Luik, and Maria Under (Seppar, 2024a). One of her most creative text sources was a compilation of texts from slogans collected from phrases screen printed on girls' and boys' t-shirts.³ Seppar writes predominantly for SATB ensembles, with a few of those compositions also rearranged for other voicings. She has received commissions from the Estonian Music Days, the Estonian Choral Association, and the Estonian Composers' Union and her music has been performed by SWR Vokalensemble, Netherlands Chamber Choir, Norwegian Soloists' Choir, Latvian Radio Choir, and the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir (Seppar, 2024b). As her compositions become performed more frequently, she is expanding both her commission requests as well as performances both in frequency and international location.

Q: What does Seppar's music sound like? What is 'new' in her sound? What acknowledges the past, and how?

Seppar uses vocal slides to add energy to phrases and give vocal lines a character-like personality within the compositions. It is as if she presents musical questions and answers in a dialogue between the voice parts with very expressive results. She will also spread out the text through the voices, with each section taking a different syllable of a word with an individual note and entrance (Seppar, 2018). Using portions of words and humming sounds expands the colour and harmonic aura of her works, creating an open and lacelike sound overall. Seppar creates a soundscape that separates the melody between the voices in a patchwork-like way. The lack of a sustained melodic line within one voice part is a compositional technique that was not developed until after the Soviet occupation and highlights changes in how composers view and interpret melody within their pieces. Composers can use fragments or whole phrases of the folk melody, but applying techniques that separate the voices or change the rhythmic focus breathes a new life into traditional forms.

Q: How does the rest of the Baltic musical world respond to these composers? How are they similar to their immediate teachers and predecessors, and in which ways do they depart from their recent historical practitioners?

² The analysis of Evelin Seppar's choral compositions was based on the pieces available through the Estonian Music Information Centre's website.

³ 'Girls & Boys' (2017) for male ensemble. Commissioned by Olga Vocal Ensemble.

Although just a limited introduction to these composers and their works, this survey shows that a generation of beyond-the-post-Soviet composers in the Baltic region are continuing the strong traditions of composers in the past, but with their own innovative spirits. All four composers state that folk song traditions are a foundational part of their compositional style and structure, but each have found new treatments to those songs. This generation of composers leans heavily on the inspiration of their ancient ancestors, but not as much on the more recent elders. Ancient folk songs, vocal techniques, and rhythms are being chosen over Romantic and early-twentieth-century harmonies. Use of new harmonic textures, voicings, accompaniments, and mixtures of text sources allow those deeply rooted folk songs, folk elements, and texts to come to life and be refreshed and reborn with new perspectives. It is because of this outlook and applications that the folk traditions in this region will not only survive, but thrive for generations.

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PART II:

MAINSTREAMS AND SUBCULTURES BEYOND THE POST-SOVIET

CHAPTER 3

Kings of the Disco: The Politics of Fun and the Estonian ‘Lowbrow’

Oliver Aas

Understanding the Lowbrow

I once mentioned to someone that I was working on an article on Estonian music culture. They asked, naturally enough, whether it was an article on Arvo Pärt, the Estonian composer. No, no, I responded, it was on popular forms from the late 1990s and early aughts – basically, the Estonian equivalent of the delightfully ‘lowbrow’ German Schlager. They were baffled. ‘*Why would you want to listen to that...*’ That *what*? They did not finish the sentence, and did not need to. It was clear they would have filled in the blank with something like ‘*garbage*’ or ‘*schlock*’ or some other pejorative suitable to music this loud, high-paced, obnoxious, and deliberately free of all subtlety. I was not shocked. The opinion is common enough – dominant, actually, among a certain cultural status group. Yet, growing up in a quasi-rural part of Estonia in the late 1990s and early aughts, I could not help but recall the presence of this music and how widely it was enjoyed. It was not particularly *my* thing, this brand of music, but it would have been absurd for me to say it had no meaning or value when, for so many years, its meaning and value had been so evidently on display in the lives around me. It merely required that we expand our frames a little in order to accommodate its meanings and its value. It required different questions. How is the ‘lowbrow’ understood and misunderstood? How is

it negotiated across differing contexts? Or more directly: how can or should ‘lowbrow’¹ music be *interpreted*?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many post-socialist countries found themselves at a cultural crossroads. This was particularly evident in the various pop musics that formed around ‘popular’ identities. Suddenly released from one historical and cultural trajectory, one could almost discern in the music itself a question: ‘*Where do we go from here?*’ The Estonian music scene of the 1990s had its fair share of pop music created by the same Euro-pop impulse conquering the rest of Europe (Best B4, Push Up, Noisy Nation, Tiiu, and Nancy, among many others), but it could also boast some forms that, while not entirely original, were not merely more-of-the-same – perhaps, most famously, the Kuldne Trio and Onu Bella. Their songs made no pretence of being Western, original, new, high-brow – or really any particular thing at all. We might say, somewhat paradoxically, that they ‘catered to everyone.’ They professed no other musical aspirations than being about fun, freedom, and humour. Then again, who is to say that fun, freedom, and humour are not sufficiently aspirational or even respectable aesthetic categories? The mainstream output of the subsequent decades increasingly resembled Western pop music, but interestingly enough, these ‘lowbrow’ hits have not, in the least, lost their appeal. In fact, many have gone on to secure their place as popular classics. What, then, are we to make of this music?

I will start with one such classic – ‘*Rekkamehe Argipäev*’ (The Daily Life of the Trucker) by one of the most iconic Estonian bands of the early 2000s, Meie Mees (roughly translated as ‘Our Guy’). The song from the 2002 album *Kutse Napsule* (Invitation to Drink) is, as the title betrays, about a truck driver. Stuck at the Latvian border, he listens to Latvian pop music playing on the radio and makes his way across the Latvian landscape, finally bribing a customs officer at the Polish border. If we choose to *really* listen, these lyrics describe more than just isolated incidents in the life of a man. They describe larger social processes. Our trucker is the figure of the ‘Everyman’ (*Igamees*), a working-class man just trying to get by – literally in this case, trying to navigate his way

¹ This chapter conceives of ‘lowbrow’ as a discursive rather than an evaluative category. I am indebted here to Simon Frith’s influential ‘Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music’ (2004 [1987], p. 33), which suggests that ‘popular’ and ‘serious’ music are the products of certain social values. If ‘serious’ music is almost exclusively studied at the aesthetic register with the sociological aspect left behind, then ‘popular’ music is only understood through its sociological function and, subsequently, is assumed to have no other value than as sociological raw data.

across relatively recently defined borders and territories, rules, and understandings. Our trucker is really a trope, and it is little coincidence that similar tropes and stories were adopted by other 'lowbrow' bands of the era. It was indicative of something larger, something deserving of further investigation.

Some of these musical roots may reach back into the Soviet-era appropriation of Western music, but I make the case here that, despite their 'vintage' sound and presentation, bands like Meie Mees and others of its kind were far from being mere echoes of a Soviet past. They were speaking to what were very present changes in the sociocultural landscape of Estonia. Nostalgia is less about merely dwelling in the past than it is about refusing the present reality. If contemporary pop music production – in Estonia and elsewhere – is saddled with relatively generic lyrics, 'lowbrow' musical production still manages to capture a number of transnational phenomena specific to their epoch and geography: economic migration (mostly to Finland), consumer desires, changing ideals of masculinity, and questions of homeland, to name a few.

The truck driver song, as well as many others similar to it, testify to the novel spaces created by open borders but also the psychological tolls of working abroad while yearning to return home. The trucker, flipping through the radio band, traversing borders, reflecting in his cabin on the passing landscapes, is confronting the conditions of the present as much as anyone. These songs need to be heard as interventionist, particularly since working class men – especially those working abroad and negotiating these conditions on a daily basis – have too often been represented as the object of parody or ridicule. Richard Butsch (2005, p. 112), in one of the more thorough accounts of working-class representations in popular culture, suggests that there has been a continual 'devaluing [of] working class men's masculinity,' as well as a culture-wide depiction of these men as fools. In the Estonian context, working class men, especially those in rural areas, have been considered 'the greatest "losers" of the post-socialist transition' (Saar quoted in Kirch-Schneider, 2019, p. 17). This very term, 'loser,' should arouse sympathy and understanding rather than pity and contempt, but does not because we have failed – and often refused – to lift the figure of the working class man out of these stereotypes and place it into the dignifying context of transnational movement. This chapter suggests that the 'lowbrow' aesthetic is an important repository for thinking through contemporary Estonian experience because it offers ample means for theorizing gender and class imaginaries through the most ordinary and conspicuous aesthetic forms. The contradictions of these songs – being, on the one hand, indebted to socialist aesthetics, but on the other, working

through transnationalist themes – are after all indicative of ‘the Estonian condition’ foundational to our contemporary social fabric.

Bands like Meie Mees, along with Hellad Velled, Sinu Naine, and Elumees, and numerous others,² are not only fronted by male vocalists; their visual representation and lyrics adhere to – while also poking fun at – the old norms of Estonian machismo (see Figure 3.1). Often overweight, tackily clad, eager to demonstrate their masculine prowess, and reliant on musical intensity rather than subtlety, these bands proudly defy the dictates of received taste. In the liberal mainstream and left-leaning circles, they fully epitomize ‘bad taste.’³ They make for a curious musical mix as well, aesthetically speaking. They are indebted to folksy music traditions of village parties in which live music performance takes precedence over finished musical products. Their ‘lowbrow sound’ (at least in its Estonian formation) also borrows from Russian Estrada, Schlager, Finnish pop music of the 1990s, San Remo Song Festival outputs of the 1980s, as well as Europop and the ‘trancey’ branch of Russian pop music from the 1990s and early 2000s. Hellad Velled, for example, has ‘borrowed’ songs from Russian (Ruki Vverh!), Finnish (Tuure Kilpeläinen), and Romanian (O-Zone) counterparts.

While Hellad Velled, a currently in-demand band whose touring schedule appears at the time of writing in 2023 to be fully booked until at least the end of 2024, has a few original numbers, they nevertheless capitalize on the success of already-popular songs by creating covers with locally adapted lyrics. Such acts are commonly understood more as touring bands rather than as ‘singer-songwriters.’ This, however, may be selling them short. If they were only a performance or only a cover band, how would we explain the

² The names of the bands play with different masculine expressions: Meie Mees translates as ‘Our Guy,’ while Elumees roughly translates as ‘Playboy,’ and Sinu Naine as ‘Your Woman.’

³ The question of bad taste seems to be a recurring theme in writing about lowbrow culture. In a recent issue of the leftist cultural newspaper *Müürileht*, for example, a writer going by the alias Maiduk Lifecoach (2022) takes issue with a number of Estonian preferences (food, cars, housing, overpriced gas station coffee, used German automobiles). Chief among his grievances, however, is music. Listing Estonian lowbrow music powerhouses Hellad Velled and Meie Mees as objects of contention, Lifecoach is in disbelief over the attraction to bands that, according to him, cannot even keep up with the music they are miming. In witnessing the hoopla surrounding a Hellad Velled performance, however, even he has to concede that ‘the party was in full swing and the spirits were high’ (*Pidu oli täies hoos, meeoleolu ülev*).



Figure 3.1. Hellad Velled showing off their signature style. Image credit: Meie Mees.

popularity of their songs on YouTube where the originals were equally available? There is some added value to be explained. Despite a lack of attention from mainstream Estonian media outlets, some songs by Hellad Velled such as 'London' and 'Tee Lahti Mu Lukud' (Open Up My Zippers) have more than four million views on YouTube alone.⁴ While view-counts are not necessarily decisive in terms of aesthetics, they are nevertheless indications of the sheer pleasure people receive from certain songs in their willingness to play them over and over (and over) again. At the very least, we can say with confidence that the song and performers are loved by their audiences with some degree of fervour. Metrics aside, the YouTube videos themselves reveal the effects (and affects) their performances are able to produce. Their appeal comes not from their originality or songcraft, but from the fun and excitement stirred by deeply and directly speaking to people in a relatable musical language. They really are, to quote one of their songs, 'kings of the disco' (*Diskosaali kunn*).

⁴ Estonia has a population of 1.3 million with a limited linguistic reach beyond its borders. If these view counts were applied to Estonia's population, it would mean that each and every Estonian has listened to these songs around three times.

To put it simply, their music is *fun*. Why, however, is there so little room for the question of ‘fun’ in critical analyses of class and gender in the increasingly transnational post-Soviet context? Why have such studies been dominated by an emphasis on misery and hardship (see Tereškinas, 2009, p. 84; Kesküla, 2015)? Leisure practices offer crucial insight into how people sense and express the spirit of their times. This is particularly true of musical pleasure, which should prompt a rigorous curiosity rather than sneering dismissal. What is the appeal of these bands? How do we contextualize their popularity historically as well as in the present moment? What can they tell us about the ‘Estonian condition’ today? What if we took those fun, pleasurable forms seriously and carefully look at the work the lowbrow performs?

These musicians are rarely, if ever, historicized, analysed, or contextualized. Their popularity is mostly evident in online spaces. I started the chapter by calling Meie Mees one of the most popular bands of recent decades. This may seem to contradict my argument for the *absence* of working class masculinities, but Meie Mees is, by and large, an exception to the rule. They are widely known among Estonian-speaking people. While they also enjoyed massive touring success, their fame (or notoriety) is mostly due to the public presence of frontman Aivar Riisalu. Riisalu, a member of the pro-Russia Centre Party, has ventured into politics and was elected to the parliament in 2007 and 2011, and his public persona has been embellished further by the details of his private life.

For all the popularity and potential political implications, though, has anyone published a scholarly article on the cultural significance of Meie Mees or Hellad Velled? When tackling broad social questions, why would we omit those who have most influenced society at large, as is the case with these bands, as well as so many other forms – pornography, kitsch, television, ‘chicklit’ – excluded from serious highbrow consideration? We never really tackle how influential the lowbrow really is.⁵ Even when the lowbrow music

⁵ While beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be fruitful to think of the lowbrow as a ‘body genre’ (Williams, 1991) that understands the body through an excess of emotion (pleasure, disgust, joy). Because bodily enjoyment in Estonian lowbrow is a central theme by way of drinking, sexual enjoyment, or even misery, it also suggests that the working-class body is central to the genre. For Williams, the joy of viewing has traditionally been constructed as masculine, but the body that has offered most sensation has been that of the ‘out of control female’ (Williams, 1991, p. 4). We might accordingly suggest that the spectator has been traditionally constructed as middle class as well, which could help explain the feelings

of recent decades is considered, it is looked upon as an unwanted supplement to the recent renaissance of more high-brow folk music (such as ethno-pop artist Curly Strings); the Estonian lowbrow is never analysed with full conceptual and analytical rigor (Jussufi, 2010). There are occasional interviews in mainstream newspapers like *Õhtuleht*, but the presence of these bands – bar Meie Mees – is hardly tangible beyond their digital footprint. With the exception of the station Radio Elmar that only plays songs in Estonian and arguably caters to older and more rural audiences, other 'lowbrow' bands, as I have been suggesting, are hardly ever heard on the radio or seen on television. By their own admission, Hellad Velled sees themselves first and foremost as a touring act who does it for pleasure rather than being 'important performers' (*tähtis band*) who need to constantly release original music (Leivak, 2022).⁶

Surveying internet comments about lowbrow performers, many commend the artists for their simplicity, lack of fussiness, and fun approach. These bands succeed not in spite of their 'simplicity' but precisely because of it. This same everydayness is evident in their lyrics as well, which recount scenes from quotidian life. Those who study popular music lyrics are often keen to remind us that the meaning of popular music is essentially forged in its use rather than by the intentions of the songwriter (Street, 1986, p. 7), even if some nevertheless remain committed to the idea of 'pop's ability to speak to and for a community (Rolston, 2001, p. 51). As this chapter is a preliminary analysis of the intersection between lowbrow music and the politics of fun in Estonia, 'community' or 'belonging' cannot be presupposed. They remain in question. Is the lowbrow 'pre-political' or is it more firmly linked with the advent of right-wing politics, Euroskepticism, and rurality, for instance? On one hand, to position lowbrow as 'pre-political' is to place it outside the domain of political activity and see it instead as non-consequential entertainment, even if the music may later have political effects (see Millar, 2020 on the question of the 'pre-political'). This is potentially problematic. On the other hand, I do not think the phenomenon of the lowbrow is entirely separable from right-wing politics because of the explicit rhetoric (of the 'Everyman') that both

of embarrassment and disgust many feel when they see or hear the lowbrow; it differs from accepted and conventional modes of viewing and consuming.

⁶ In this article, Leivak uses terms like 'very popular among the people' (*rahvas seas ülipopid*) to indicate an absence in the mainstream and, instead, a presence among 'the people' (read: the Everyman). Leivak also notes that there may be people who, despite the popularity of the band, may not have heard of the performers, which would be very strange for other artists with equal reach and popularity.

the songs and politicians use, albeit in different registers. However, as of now, there is no hard ‘proof’ that these songs only appeal to right-wing voters or that they are used for effective right-wing community mobilization or identity building. Even in the case of Riisalu, whose party has long been connected to pro-Russian politics, one could argue that his appeal far exceeds that of the right-wing audiences and, in fact, he has a much wider appeal.

Today, Meie Mees has become an icon of kitsch and the transition era, now even performing for university students, who take their performances with a grain of salt. For this reason, I will keep these questions deliberately open-ended since we currently cannot make generalizations about the audiences. We *can* nevertheless confidently assert that lowbrow musical forms tell us something radically specific about class and epoch. Compared to recent chart-topping hits by popular artists like Karl-Erik Taukar, NOËP, or Liis Lemsalu, whose sounds resemble contemporary (generic) Western pop music, lyrics by Hellad Velled and Meie Mees often touch on local phenomena: themes like working in Finland, being hungover, partying, being from the rural parts of Estonia, and admiring fancy cars (that they do not have).

These lyrics do *not* speak to another time, as it were, but are very much in dialogue with today’s concerns. The ‘Everyman’ quality of their work draws attention to pervasive, but often unheard, aspects of everyday life. Echoing sentiments of regained independence after the fall of the Soviet Union and living with its legacy (*Moskva* [Moscow] by Meie Mees); the free movement of goods and people in an integrated Europe (*Rekkamehe Argipäev* [The Daily Life of the Trucker] by Meie Mees; *Poeg on kodus* [The Return of the Prodigal Son] by Hellad Velled); and a growing desire for consumer goods (*Cadillac* by Elumees or *Valge Mersu* [White Mercedes] by Meie Mees), the lyrics are emblematic of what has elsewhere been called ‘transition culture’ in which planned economies were replaced with ‘liberal utilitarianism.’ While this transition may have technically ‘happened’ decades ago, psychologically and economically, we are still adjusting to the changes. Perhaps, today, it would make more sense to talk about the afterlife of the transition in which society is divided through wealth and income, into haves and have-nots (Keller, 2005, p. 66). Often, these songs articulate a social imaginary of those who are finding themselves caught between the uncritical embrace of Westernized ideals and the ongoing legacies of socialism. Neither blindly nostalgic about the lost past nor a celebration of the present, these songs perform the tightrope negotiation of contemporary Estonian life.

In addition to the content (e.g. lyrics), we also need to look at the function (e.g. performance) of their music. Here, we might call on Guldžahon Jussufi's conceptual and historical distinctions between 'folksy' (*rahvalik muusika*) and 'folk' music (*rahvamuusika*) (2010, p. 67). Though the boundaries are malleable and Jussufi suggests that folksy music is part of folk music traditions, he mainly argues that folk music has more to do with musical ancestry and intra-community traditions while folksy music is about performance, partying, enjoyment, and singing. To illustrate the latter, Jussufi re-imagines a scene (most likely from the nineteenth century) in which villagers have the musician playing either the zither or accordion with people dancing around it (Jussufi, 2010, p. 67) (on historical resonances, see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). While the individual elements of folk and folksy music may overlap, it is pertinent to remember that folksy music, as it is performed at village parties or in more contemporary settings like pubs, bars, and other concert venues, is not as historically influenced or indebted to its traditional roots as folk music is. When we go to a performance by Hellad Velled or Sinu Naine, we are not directly hearing traditional music, even if that may be its origins. It is rather the *remaking* of the folksy through performances in 'alternative circuits:' non-urban pubs, parking lot parties, Estonian midsummer celebrations in Finland (catering to the thousands of Estonians living there), and many other similar venues. What is new in this economy is the transnational character in which 'Estonian-ness' is mixed with other national traditions, such that folksy is no longer explicitly defined through Estonian-ness or an explicit Estonian sound. Folksy music now articulates new social and aesthetic forms in which tradition, commerce, and novelty commingle.

The tunes may be 'borrowed,' but the songs are more than merely derivative. In an article examining the Estonian re-appropriation of Western songs in the Soviet Era, Aimar Ventsel (2016) describes how he showed a clip of a young Anne Veski (an Estonian singer also popular in Russia) singing a cover of Pat Boone's 'Speedy Gonzales' to an audience of both 'Western' and 'Eastern' European scholars. Western scholars were convinced that Veski was performing a parody of Western pop music. Those that had grown up in the Soviet Union, however, or who were familiar with the region's cultural production and the Estrada style of performance, begged to differ. They saw it instead as 'claiming authenticity by mimicking Western sound and stage performance' (Ventsel, 2016, p. 80). The Estonian lyrics, in Ventsel's view, domesticated the Western song in order to perform an Estonian imaginary of 'Western-ness.' Ventsel calls this 'ersatz pop' – songs obviously lifted from the West that offer



Figure 3.2. A nineteenth-century village party scene, which functioned as a break from the dominant classes and work. Image credit: Külapidu KMM GR 1288; Tartu Ülikooli kunstimuuseum.



Figure 3.3. An Estonian village party scene from the sixteenth century. Image credit: Jürripäeva külapidu, KMM GR 426, Tartu Ülikooli kunstimuuseum.

a specific 'live experience of western culture to a Soviet audience' as well as a production of 'pseudo-Westerness' (2016, p. 81). The performance was not so much indicative of the West *per se* as it was of local circumstances and perceptions of the West in Estonia.⁷ When it comes to the contemporary lowbrow, however, it is not a presentation of 'Western-ness.' The sound may be similar to some of its contemporary Western counterparts, but the meaning (most evident in their 'non-Western' style of performing as well as their lyrics) is a reaction against westernization, modernization and globalization. It is the creation of 'Estonian-ness' as a category, almost as an attempt to congeal some semblance of identity in this age of transnational mobility and fluidity.

No Fun in Eastern Europe?

As written text rarely brings the same affective impact as live performance, we should remind ourselves of the intense emotional charge that these performances can create. It is important to avoid sterilizing and over-intellectualizing accounts of leisure in order to understand the phenomenology of enjoyment and the reasons people pursue it. What we might call 'post-proletariat leisure' is not a topic often treated in Eastern European studies – or anywhere else for that matter. Ken Roberts, a leading thinker of leisure studies, writes that in Eastern Europe leisure studies 'have been silenced' and researchers are now interested in 'the effects of the change of system' (2010, p. 170), and it is *only* through these effects that Eastern Europe is understood. It is hardly surprising, then, that whether by way of cinema, popular culture, or even critical accounts (see Rausing, 2014; Kingumets, 2022), we have become habituated to transition-era stereotypes and tropes like abandoned post-industrial towns, rural unemployment, economic stagnation, incessant alcoholism, and crumbling Soviet-era blocks of flats. By all appearances, fun simply does not exist

⁷ We might also be reminded here of Onu Bella, a master of early 1990s Estonian pop music irony who borrowed songs from Madonna, Bad Boys Blue, and Boney M, among others, and played with appropriating 'Western' aesthetics to place them in the local context. But there is an obvious difference between Bella and the contemporary lowbrow: Onu Bella's work enjoyed genuine mainstream success and he had a rather explicitly political and subversive image. He later earned a cult status and following in a way that contemporary lowbrow bands rarely do, except for Meie Mees.

in post-Soviet countries, much less in the manifold expressions now found long after Soviet occupation.

In critical discourses, even when enjoyment is considered in relation to identity categories, there is a call for subversion or resistance.⁸ Such a focus can be misleading as it can have a sensationalist understanding of Eastern European sociality, but music – especially the lowbrow – resonates with ‘ordinary’ rather than ‘subversive’ discourses. It is therefore indebted to recent thinking on what has been called ‘the design of everyday life’ (Shove et al., 2007). The lowbrow, after all, is both a discursive aesthetic category and a quotidian practice. It is a performance that blends the stage with the everyday life of the audience. A proper understanding of the lowbrow should entail an analysis of the content (e.g. the lyrics) but also the practice (e.g. performances in Finland catering to Estonians). Emphasis will have to be put on understanding the broader meaning of ‘lowbrow fun’ in the age of increasing transnationalism. This implies a parallel understanding of both the flow of musical and artistic forms across national cultures’ borders and the movement of people themselves within and across national borders. This allows us to see how phenomena that may seem radically site-specific (e.g. parties at a rural Estonian bar) are actually increasingly transnational, rather than national or ‘post-Soviet,’ in content.

There have been several exciting scholarly analyses that go beyond stereotypes in Estonian music writing in order to examine the inter-relation between gender and music (Uusma 2014; Davidjants, 2022; Ventsel, 2016, 2020). Class as a category or unit of analysis, however, has been less present. If a class dimension is added, we might enjoy a deeper social understanding of working class or rural masculinity, one no longer perceived as incapable of change. While class has recently started to emerge as an analytical category in the work of Estonian cultural scholars (Helemäe and Saar, 2012; Gross, 2020; Saarts and Saar, 2022), it is primarily in more sociological works rather than in cultural or literary analysis. The omission, however, is part of another trend in Eastern European scholarship in which ‘class’ is seen as a term laden with communist baggage; emphasis is instead placed on the formation of new class identities like the new elites and the middle class (Kesküla, 2015, p. 96). This

⁸ This is not only true of Eastern European studies, but also of the Anglophone humanities more broadly. When the question of pleasure comes up in working-class contexts, it is often thought through the lens of subversion – see Di Placido (2019), for instance.

oversight has prevented cultural studies from fully embracing lowbrow music and its intimate links to gender and masculinity. Or, perhaps it is less oversight than embarrassment that has made the lowbrow (and its implications for class and gender) such an unappealing subject of analysis. By and large, the focus of Estonian popular music analyses has been on generalized and 'cooler' topics such as alternative music and subcultures.

Recent work by Hannaliisa Uusma (2014), Brigitta Davidjants (2022), and Aimar Ventsel (2016, 2020), for example, addresses questions of gender and music in Estonian and Eastern European formations of alternative music. Uusma looks at constructions of the 'romantic macho' in post-Soviet punk music through the example of the legendary and trailblazing Estonian band, Vennaskond (think: Depeche Mode with a touch of punk). Her findings detail how Vennaskond used the alluring co-presence of machismo and something we might today understand as 'hipster-vulnerability' to create the hybrid of the 'romantic macho' (Uusma, 2014). Davidjants and Ventsel, both writing about punk music, have a more sociological or ethnographic focus, and are thus less interested in close-reading cultural artefacts. Davidjants's work focuses on the experience of female participants in the punk scene over two distinct yet partially overlapping periods of punk music production (1970s–1980s and 1990s–2000s). Ventsel is sensitive to identity categories, but immersed in subcultures; his work only tangentially deals with popular lowbrow forms (e.g. Ventsel, 2016). While indebted to these studies, I believe the time is also ripe for analysing non-subversive music, or music that in the eyes of some critics, possesses little to no aesthetic value as well. As I mentioned, the most banal, unabashedly fun, and lowbrow forms of popular music consumption⁹ offer us a different way of understanding Estonian experience in its gendered and class implications today.

⁹ Lowbrow music is challenging to talk about: current theoretical discourses are limited, condescending, or totalizing, seeing all aspects of popular culture as discursively embedded in power relations. Marxist cultural criticism that has dominated cultural analyses for the past forty years understands artistic production as part of the superstructure, 'the intellectual edifice that is the product of existing economic conditions' (Schuetz 1989, p. 4). Everything mass-produced becomes equated with industry and commodification. Popular culture is not seen as an 'intellectual result' but rather a 'production process' (Schuetz, 1989, p. 4). For Marxist cultural criticism, then, lowbrow music cannot be seen as anything other than an object of manipulation and control.

The Return of Working-Class Visibility

Both the popularity and unpopularity of these bands can be understood as part of a wider Estonian cultural politics that publicly supports ‘highbrow’ forms and denigrates the so-called ‘folksy’ arts and theatre (for instance, the theatre company Vana Baskini Teater). Egge Kulbok-Lattik’s (2008) study of the periodization of Estonian cultural politics suggests that the period of 1995–2007, the time that coincides with the music production analysed in this chapter, should be understood as ‘elitist’ (*elitistlik-säilitav kultuuripoliitika*) insofar it focused on maintaining older, highbrow forms rather than creating space for novel cultural forms. Funding was cut except for all but the most prestigious projects, and newer projects were left unfunded (Kulbok-Lattik, 2008, p. 141). It was precisely during this ‘elitist’ period of cultural production that a minor renaissance of the lowbrow really began and many of the bands, including Meie Mees, were at the height of their popularity, perhaps as a counter-reaction to the increasing pervasiveness of bourgeois culture. Indeed, it is in this improbable context, accelerated by the increasing availability of streaming platforms, that the popularity of lowbrow music has been continually renewed over the last fifteen years. This newfound popularity, then, emerges both as a response to more westernized, elitist cultural forms dominating mainstream media as well as a reaction to the absence of working-class masculinities in the public sphere more broadly.

After the period of Estonian elitism, new visions of working-class masculinity also appeared. Shows like *Maamees otsib kaaslast* (Farmer Wants a Wife)¹⁰ and *Võsareporter*¹¹ made non-dominant masculinities visible in the media. At the same time, these shows rarely represented any positive aspects of working-class masculinities. Both the shows and the responses to the shows echoed, instead, the pervading cultural elitism as the shows were subject to

¹⁰ *Maamees otsib naist* (Farmer Wants a Wife, 2007) was about rural men who were looking for love. Paired with women from the city, as well as from rural areas, the show proceeded to create sometimes humorous results, though the real focus of the show was to portray how clumsy and socially inept the men were.

¹¹ For those not familiar with the Estonian context, *Võsareporter* (2006–2012) was a highly popular TV-show that was viewed – at its peak – by several hundred thousand viewers. Led by the charismatic and no-fuss Peeter Võsa, the show – colloquially called the *60 Minutes* of the lower classes – dealt with everything from fixing broken love triangles to low-stakes fights, sometimes over 20 euros. Some of the clips have gone viral in the age of digital afterlives.

intense ridicule. In an ethnographic study of *Võsareporter*, Liis Velsker (2012, p. 77) shows that many viewers watched the series simply to feel better about their own lives. It is also interesting to note how the show – which was not particularly oriented around music – held an original song competition called *Võsa Laul*, an obvious nod to the more elitist *Eesti Laul*, a competition that doubles as the national final for the Eurovision Song Contest. The show asked participants to create folksy songs to return to the populist legacy of singing. Ten songs were chosen for the competition, and some 90,000 people called in to vote for their favourite song. However, whether the show created a more positive attitude towards working class masculinity is an entirely different matter. On the positive side, these songs were no longer representations of them but by them. On the negative side, the visual representations drew on deeply ingrained stereotypes which were often amplified for maximum 'show-effect.' In one of the pre-recorded videos that accompanied the songs, the singers sat in tractors with female companions sitting next to them, rendering the videos culturally legible only through the reinforcement of tropes of rural stagnation.

Given the general attitudes toward the lowbrow, the songs and the TV show unsurprisingly became something of a national laughingstock. Even those partial to the folksy legacy of the project said that while they commended the return to more Estonian-heritage-influenced sounds, they still found the lyrics (which echoed those purposefully loud and unsubtle songs I started the chapter with) less than ideal, to put it mildly. For instance, in one of the more positive reviews, a critic had good things to say about the sound – the return to heritage music roots – but nevertheless told the viewers to leave aside the lyrics and visuals because they were 'mainly unpleasant' (Jussufi, 2010, p. 90). This kind of commentary is quite telling of the way traditional music, and sometimes elitist culture, attempts to distance itself from any and all 'unseemliness.' Folksy music, after all, has historically been part of Estonian leisure culture(s), with musical style aligning with the non-dominant classes (see Figure 3.4). The sound may be more 'international' and thus seemingly alien now, but the function of the songs is essentially the same as it always has been: the songs provide people a little breathing room from the dominant cultural sphere. The connection between the TV-show *Võsareporter* – often portraying itself as an arbiter of the unheard – and the folksy songs performed in the show represents divergences between different class and mainstream media preferences.



Figure 3.4. *Folksy parties persisted even during the Soviet era in which they took on a more important role in maintaining national identity. This image from the 1960s depicts a village party in Kihnu. Image credit: Külapidu Kihnus. Esiplaanil Jaan Vidrik lõõtspilliga ja Anni Vidrik (MM F 1216/174); Eesti Meremuuseum SA.*

The visibility of the working classes and their practices of leisure have been also aided by changes in media technologies. The availability of uploading and streaming services like YouTube and SoundCloud has radically altered access to the lowbrow, and blurred the boundaries between what is considered low and high, mainstream and non-mainstream. People no longer rely on older media-consuming and taste-making institutions, and so music production and distribution (and along with it, tastes) have become more democratic and diverse as a result. Rebekka Lotman has shown that YouTube rap battles and Instagram poetry offer space that would be otherwise absent from the mainstream Estonian mediascape. These formats effectively change the audience, their desires, and the meaning-production of music and poetry (Lotman, 2021, p. 65). But even if rap has penetrated the Estonian music scene so deeply that it is now a mainstay in the Estonian Top 40 (Nestor quoted in Lotman, 2019, p. 65), the lowbrow has not proliferated nearly as widely. Instead, easy

access to these (party) songs has cemented the popularity of a few lowbrow powerhouses rather than further popularized the genre as a whole. This discrepancy can also be explained by the fact that a lowbrow aesthetic caters to an older generation than to audiences of 'normcore,' DIY, and rap-hitmakers, even if their respective output is shared through the same streaming services.

The Epoch Specificity of the Songs

Let us return to the trucker song I started the chapter with – '*Rekkamehe Argipäev*.' The song, told mostly through imagistic lyrics, is essentially about perpetual 'stuckness' and repetition, of boredom and waiting. Capturing the experience of long driving distances with no end in sight, both melody and lyrics are melancholically tinged, though still not devoid of humour: '*Sõidust ees on kopp/lõhnab nailonsokk/Silma all on kott/Krampis lõualott/Tuuleklaasil sopp/Peas on võidund lokk*' (Tired of driving/smelly nylon socks/bags under my eyes/clenched jaw/dirt on the windshield/grease in my hair). Rather than articulating a critique of the uneven free movement of goods, it is primarily about the experience of the trucker. It is not, however, a critical or self-pitying take. The combination of national tropes and clichés of the transition era and the pre-EU border regimes (e.g., bribing the Polish customs officer) together with a description of the haptic aspects of truck-driving, the song acquires a self-aware, ironic dimension that communicates a keen awareness of the truck driver's position as an actor in a new European economy with its gendered and economic asymmetries. Despite its mid-tempo beat and seemingly difficult subject matter, many YouTube users comment on the 'fun' aspects of the song. That is to say, the meaning of the music is ultimately made not through the lyrics alone but through an intersection of lyrics, melody, (live) performances, and social context (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6).

In the backdrop of the trucker figure is the question of masculinity, the latter of which has itself undergone a major critical revision, not to mention a large social shift in thinking about masculinity.¹² These bands often construct

¹² In a (relatively) recent ethnographic study (Trell, van Hoven, and Huigen, 2014), it was shown that rural Estonian masculinities are experiencing a major shift. One of the key takeaways was that rural masculinities increasingly construct 'alternative' or 'flexible' masculinities to adapt to the changing sociocultural circumstances. In other words, the insights emerge against generally held bias that sees working class men as unchanging.



Figures 3.5. and 3.6. Hellad Velled at one of their high energy performances. The spirits of the crowd are visibly high. Image credit and copyright: Maria Kiik.

their masculinity (against Western models) as unapologetic, presenting themselves as 'telling it like it is.' At the same time, the lyrics show a construction of masculinity that understands itself as marginalized – even if the claim itself can be statistically doubted. In a Hellad Velled song titled aptly enough 'Mees' (Man), 'adapted' from the Portion Boys song 'Lännen nopein mies,' the lyrics touch upon the imperative of the Estonian man, to go on with the show, as it were, and not complain, even if you may have complaints about money or the onerous demands of everyday life. The song thus captures that very ethos of being an 'Estonian man' – understood here as a discursive and historical construction – while also having a meta-awareness of its stereotypical connotations. But it is not a case of unacknowledged machismo; the song is aware of where Estonian masculinity stands in the hierarchies of various ideological discourses. The song's reference to Estonian serfdom as well as the song's blatant refusal to '*mõisat ei orja*' (work for the manor), indicates a broader frame of Estonian masculinity that has long positioned itself against dominant classes, something also evident in contemporary Estonian opposition politics that sometimes imagines the EU as its adversary. The lyrics draw on histories of Russian and German occupation, constructing Estonian masculinity as something 'getting on despite it all' within a wider temporality than 'merely' the post-Soviet.

That is to say, even if the masculinity that is constructed by these bands draws heavily on very potent figures of machismo, it is not necessarily hegemonic because it sees itself in relation to either the Soviet power matrix or, more contemporarily, to the image of the Anglo-American man. From R. W. Connell's (2015) now classic (and at times tirelessly rehashed) formulation, we know that hegemonic masculinities are different from 'subordinated' masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was never the statistical norm per se insofar it remained an unreachable ideal for most, but it is nevertheless normative and prescriptive of how men *should* behave. The key aspect in this formulation is the inter-psychic relationship men have to masculinity as they measure themselves against this ideal. These bands and their songs resonated with the dominant masculine vision in post-independence Estonia. As a result of globalization and the unification of beauty ideals in the Global North as well as Eastern Europe, however, they no longer represent the hegemonic ideal, which has been replaced by a more polished, subtle appearance, if still carrying the same masculine ideology and logic of subordination.¹³ But precisely

¹³ Even within the Eastern European landscape of masculinity, there are vast

by knowing that they are not seen as part of the contemporary global ideal, the songs avoid retreating into self-pity, self-seriousness, or even anger. Their visual appearance, too, corroborates this. Pink shirts, colourful trousers, and busy graphic T-shirts all point to their humorous stance on Estonian masculinity. Their awareness of not fitting into the mainstream ideals of masculinity, I would suggest, is what permits such an ironic approach. Absent anger and resentment, their lyrics can be read as ‘fun’ by admirers; they are read as ‘true’ but also ‘playful.’

Another emerging phenomenon that is strongly correlated with class and gender implications, and a theme subsequently picked up in lowbrow music, is the ability and need to work away from home. Short-term or seasonal labour abroad has become the go-to option for many men in Estonia and other post-transition economies trying to escape social and financial precarity. These are often people who never really wanted to move abroad, have a limited experience with foreign languages, but are lured by greater financial security. Open borders change life in Estonia but also in those communities that host Estonian workers. It is estimated that around 30,000 Estonian people, 85% of whom are men, commute to Finland for periods of time to work (Telve, 2019, p. 1258). The men who work in Finland have become colloquially known as ‘*Kalevipojad*,’ borrowing an image from the hero of the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg*. The popular figure of Kalevipoeg (including the eponymous epic hero) is known for his clumsiness, brutishness, and lack of refinement. Over the last fifteen years, this colloquial term has often been used as a quasi-derogatory term for Estonian men working in Finland, usually in construction. In ‘*Poeg on tulnud koju*’ (The Return of the Prodigal Son) by Hellad Velled – an Estonian adaptation of the Finnish song ‘*Poikaa Sauno*’ by Poju¹⁴ – listeners are (re)introduced to the joy of coming together and returning to one’s homeland after a time working away: ‘*Nüüd laulgem kaasa/ see viis üle metsade kuulda/ pidu käib eestimaal/ meie poeg on tulnud koju*’ (Now let us sing/our song is heard all over the forests/there’s a party in Estonia/the prodigal son

changes to the concept. In one case, Kare Petrone (2021) demonstrates the return of the soldierly ideal in Russia that is positioned against the ‘feminine’ civilian counterparts. For a rich discussion on gender in post-Soviet culture, see Marsh (2013).

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the Finnish original was created to welcome back the Finnish ice hockey team after winning the 2011 IIHF World Championship Final. That is to say, the topic of return – albeit in different contexts – is emphasized in both versions.

has returned). The song does not explicitly mention Finland; however, in the framework of similar songs and social situations, the song can only be understood as returning from Finland or the 'Westernized' (read: capitalist) city life in which all simplicity has been lost in the hustle for economic survival. There seems to be little regret or misery in the set-up; rather the song – in performance and content – offers a collective moment of pleasure, if not ebullience.

If '*Poeg on tulnud koju*' treats movement as both metaphoric and literal, other songs treat movement from the perspective of transnationalism and the free movement of goods. In some songs, the car itself becomes something of a fetish. The previous focus on the open road turns instead to the car itself as an object. The car becomes a symbol of status, neoliberal futurity, and free movement. Vehicles, as Karen Pinkus has shown, have always been constructed 'ahead of their time' (2008, p. 2005) promising a future different from our own and taking place in 'a smooth and neoliberal space, where passengers move as freely as goods and capital' (2008, p. 2007). If the early nineties saw the Fiat as an aspirational object (most notoriously in a song by Onu Bella), more recent songs talk about the Mercedes (songs by Meie Mees) and Cadillac (songs by Elumees). In a song called '*Vinge Päss*' (A Cool Lad) by Meie Mees, the lyrics show the use-value of the car: '*Sõber mul on Priit/see Priit on auto-friik/Ta elab ainult autos/teeb piip piip änn tuut tuut/meil autod vinged, seljas adi dress/ tibid teevad jess, tibid teevad jess*' (I have a friend Priit/My friend Priit is a car freak/He only lives in his car and he goes toot toot/Our cars are awesome, wearing an Adidas tracksuit/the girls go yes, the girls go yes). While the song pokes fun at the fetishistic relationship men are presumed to have with their cars, it still links these luxury vehicles with the ability to win female attention and sexual conquests.

The car is no longer merely a machine for moving things from point A to point B. In this song, it is rather a machine that, by dint of the semiotic force of fancier brands, attracts something or someone else to its driver or owner. The expensive car, however, remains a wholly aspirational object, out of reach for the many. The song '*Valge Mersu*' (White Mercedes) tells us from the start that the car – the object of the song – is borrowed: '*Õhtult töölt ma koju sõitsin/laenuks valge mersu võtsin/mersu roolis hea näen välja/dressipüksid tõmban jalga*' (I drove home from work at night/took a white Mercedes as a loan/I look good at the Mercedes's wheel/I will wear my tracksuit). The song hovers between reality and the masculine fantasy of fast cars, both desiring and poking fun at that desire. And because both the car and women remain unavailable,

the actual subject of the song is driving around in a fancy car – the very experience and joy of it.

More universally relatable lyrics about loneliness, wanting to relive youth, or being dumped are also pervasive themes in this genre. Again, however, the lyrics are time- and site-specific. In a Hellad Velled song called ‘London,’ the group sings about the desire to leave behind ‘*hüvasti Eesti riik!*’ (the Estonian state). At the heart of these lyrics is the fear and anxiety of being left behind. Scholars studying Estonian cultural memory have identified two grand historical narratives at play: first, the historically specific victimization of Estonians, and second, the Herculean resistance to the Soviet regime. Liina Ly-Roos (2022, p. 3) suggests that these two dominant narratives have resulted in the trope of ‘it’s so bad to be Estonian,’ something that is also explicitly parodied in liberal media outputs like the comedy sketch show *Tujurikkuja*. While direct negative references to the Soviet regime are rare in the songs of the bands I consider to here, the Soviet era has nevertheless left a tangible imprint; there are songs, for instance, about sending a lover to Russia (*Ma saadan su no-pyckku*), which stands in as code for ‘piss off’ (*ma saadan su pikalt*) and many of the songs sporadically use the Russian language. On the one hand, the song draws its force from the ‘it’s-so-hard-to-be-Estonian’ trope in which Estonians are positioned as us-against-everyone-else. From another angle, the songs abstain from anger and are never serious enough to be fully reminiscent of nationalistic songs,¹⁵ nor are they hyperbolic enough to be construed as parodies of machismo. It means that even songs that at a superficial glance appear to be ‘generic’ are actually indebted to historical tropes. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless difficult to understand what their political and cultural positions really are. All we can say for sure is that these songs lie somewhere along a spectrum ranging from self-seriousness to parody, while conforming to neither, making ‘playfulness’ its central aesthetic register.

¹⁵ If one looks at the recent wave of the lowbrow in the past five years, catering to much younger audiences than the bands I am discussing here, one can see an increasingly nationalistic tendency that also parallels the rise of right-wing politics in Estonia. Renate’s ‘*Oma rahvust ei salga ma maha*’ (I Will Not Deny My Nationality) or Hunt’s ‘*Eestlane*’ (Estonian) show a strong commitment to much earlier tropes and, tonally, it is much less indebted to humor and ambivalence but more to disappointment and taking a very self-serious stance about ‘rootedness.’

Conclusion

Considering that so much of this chapter has been about the experience of performance, let me finish with another encounter, this time imagined. Picture yourself at one of these live shows: people going wild, music blasting, the venue pulsing with excitement. What about this is new and what is already familiar? Though drawing on older historical traditions, some even from *before* the Soviet era, they are also, as this chapter has been suggesting, very timely: they are *re*-imagining the folksy tradition as well as carving space for something routinely absent. By tackling a range of social issues – perhaps even unbeknownst to themselves – the genre of the lowbrow is far more expansive than it has been given credit for. This is counter to the dominant understanding of these bands as artistically inept and ideologically backwards, occupying a different temporal register. These songs, which have for far too long been treated as incidental or worthless, are actually very rich.

Much could be said about the lowbrow's roots in Soviet musical production, but such a critical focus overshadows the sheer joy experienced through that music as well as the genre's links to other national registers. The joy of the lowbrow – its bodily affect above all – is precisely the point of their performance. These bands cater to a different aesthetic and taste register that purposefully draws on 'bad taste' discourse. As this chapter hopefully demonstrates, music, pleasure, class, and gender come together in so-called lowbrow musical performances that offer a site- and time-specific understanding of contemporary life against the dominant and homogenized 'Westernized' cultural ideals and aesthetics. Until now, very little attention has been paid to these interactions in scholarly spaces. The 'lowbrow,' however, enunciates a reaction to the changing sociopolitical and cultural landscapes in Estonia that deem the cultural presence of seemingly antiquated figurations of masculinity to be the stuff of lower classes and the uneducated.

While the lyrics in these songs may derive from sociological issues, the lowbrow mediates these problems by making them a subject of collective joy rather than lament; it elevates these issues into acts of whimsy. By playing with hyperbolic takes on masculinity and tropes of Estonian-ness, these bands make fun and playfulness their central aesthetic categories. These songs (and bands) articulate a unique space in Estonian popular culture: the coping mechanisms of the explicitly working-class man. Much more work will need to be done, however, to understand how these bands relate to other popular forms like parody, stand-up comedy, and even folklore. Further analysis is

also needed to specify what is traditional, folksy, or, conversely, post-Soviet, transnational, or capitalist about these songs. In what ways do these songs and performances exceed those frames, and in what ways they fall short? Ultimately, however, there is only so much theorizing one can do. These bands are about experience, not intellectualization. Perhaps, instead of *thinking* about these bands, we should just go to one of their performances. After all, isn't that the point?

Acknowledgements

In addition to the editors of this volume and the anonymous reviewers who have all provided invaluable feedback, I would also like to thank the participants and organizers of the 'Socialism's Divergent Masculinities. Representations of Male Subjectivities in Soviet Constellations and Beyond' conference in Berlin (16–18 June 2022) where I presented an earlier draft of this paper. My gratitude for probing questions and for helping me develop the argument when I was still in the earlier stages of the writing process goes to Matthias Schwartz, Dirk Uffelmann, Tamara Hundorova, and in particular to Serguei Oushakine who directed me towards the question of fun. And, to Brandon Joyce, for being a careful reader of this text and helping me navigate my writing.

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CHAPTER 4

Contesting Narratives of Post-Soviet Estonian Fandoms: The Case of the Estonian Depeche Mode Fan Club

Brigitta Davidjants

Nowadays, music fans are no longer seen as passive consumers. In addition to musicians and distributors, fans play a crucial role in circulating music (Shuker, 2018, p. 122). In this chapter, I analyse narratives from participants in the longest-running fandom in Estonia: the Estonian Depeche Mode Fan Club (EDMFK, founded in 1992). Over its thirty-year history, EDMFK has maintained a core membership, while hundreds of people have been involved for shorter periods. In the local subcultural landscape and the socio-cultural context in which it emerged, the EDMFK was distinctive in many respects. First, the concept of fan clubs was essentially unknown in newly independent Estonia, and their participatory culture was a niche phenomenon (Zwaan, Duits, and Reijnders, 2014, p. 2). Second, at a time when subcultural interaction took place mainly in physical urban spaces, the EDMFK – which attracted school-age youth – kept up a strong following nationwide as a result of letter writing, in many cases linking up youngsters from rural areas and urban centres. The club's third distinctive aspect – in an era when Estonian- and Russian-language communities had largely separate existences for decades – was its crossing of ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Fourth, re-independent Estonia was characterized by strict gender roles, which meant that in the mainstream, 'beauty culture' prevailed among women and 'tough guy' stereotypes among men (cf. Aas in this volume). These gender roles operated in pop culture as well, easily recognized in the disco movement (Davidjants, 2022, p. 6) that stood in stark contrast to the distinctive styles and musical preferences of EDMFK members.

The EDMFK is a fandom and, more broadly, a subculture. Subcultures overlap with fandoms, and for the purposes of this chapter, fandoms are defined as ongoing social relationships in a group and the meanings people give experiences and objects, including music (Haenfler, 2014, p. 25). Fandoms, then, are communities that share a deep interest in an object of popular culture that inspires cultural activities pursued jointly with other fans (Jenkins, 2006). In the case of EDMFK, common pursuits include organizing events and publishing newspapers. Out of the club's three decades of activity, I will use a micro-historical approach to focus on a specific moment – personal narratives of fandom experience in the 1990s. To sketch a collective representation of experiences through personal memories (Marcus, 1993, pp. 316–317), I analyse the narratives of ten club participants from the pre-internet period, complemented by an analysis of the club's zines (*Eesti Depeche Mode fännklubi ajaleht* [Estonian Depeche Mode fan-club newspaper, hereafter EDMFK newspaper] [1992–1995] and the magazine *Devotee* [1995–2001]).

Pop culture is a field in which oral memories often constitute prime sources of historical data. As Bennett (2010, p. 245) states, aging and biography, as well as remembering and critical reflection, are key elements in analysing and interpreting popular music's social and cultural meaning. Personal stories also reveal subcultural experiences as historical phenomena: 'the analysis of the relationship between the two – the personal and shared memories – can serve to explore the field of tension between subcultural myths and individual experiences' (Andresen, 2020, p. 200). On the whole, personal stories focus on individual experience and demonstrate how individual and collective memories intertwine as people remember shared experiences.

The Formation of the EDMFK in 1992

We knew from television that Estonia had been hit by a DM [Depeche Mode] craze, and somehow we also knew that this was very popular among Russians. Still, it was the club advertisement that made us realize that, in Estonia, we were not alone. (Marek, 2022)¹

¹ For the purpose of privacy, the surnames of the research participants will not be provided in the citations. All quotations are translated by the author. Quotes from interviews are used with research participants' permission.

The formation of the EDMFK is an instance of the cultural transnationalisation of a fandom or local fandom ‘going global.’ The formation of fan communities around popular cultural products from abroad takes place globally (Lee, 2014, p. 195). The EDMFK was not the only one of its kind, and both Soviet and re-independent Estonia witnessed a series of fandom movements, notably those of The Beatles in the 1960s (Valme, 2014) and Metallica in the 1990s (Erlach, 1999). Despite the restrictions of Soviet censorship (Vesker, 2018, p. 2), influential pop music albums by Led Zeppelin, Sex Pistols, and many others found their way to and circulated in Soviet Estonia almost at the same time they were released (Lang, 2020; Oja, 2016, pp. 11–12).

Interviews with research participants show that the English synth pop band Depeche Mode (DM) caught Estonian audiences’ attention soon after its formation in 1980. For example, Yuri Reponen (1971–2022), an industrial and EBM DJ from Pärnu (a principal urban centre in western Estonia) who was extensively involved in the EDMFK, recalled hearing DM for the first time in 1983 on a tape brought from Tallinn. Beginning in the mid-1980s, occasional mentions of DM appeared in the local Estonian media. For example, in 1986 the University of Tartu newspaper advertised a midnight dance party at the University Club mentioning Eurythmics and DM as some music to be played (Anon, 1986, p. 4). DM’s music was also played on Estonian radio stations (Anon, 1989, p. 4). Their popularity and impact in Estonia is reflected in an announcement which appeared in the magazine *Muusik* (Musician) (Anon, 1990/6, p. 6): ‘To the sorrow of its many fans, we must refute the rumour that DEPECHE MODE will be giving concerts in [Estonia] in the near future. Let’s hope though that this will come to pass some day.’ In the same issue, readers Annika and Julia from Kuressaare wrote: ‘We would very much like to know everything about the English band Depeche Mode,’ to which the editors responded with a thorough overview (Anon, 1990/6, p. 20).

After half a century of Soviet occupation, Estonia regained independence in 1991. Although the budding pop culture in Estonia, as elsewhere, was characterised by an active disco scene, a wide variety of subcultures also emerged. The dismantling of Soviet rule meant the opening of borders, which allowed people to travel to the West and greatly improved local access to Western pop culture (Davidjants, 2022, p. 2). Unlike at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Estonian subcultures confined themselves to urban centres, subcultural scenes in the 1990s were found all around the country: the centre of the national house scene was the small town of Kilingi-Nõmme, rap scenes thrived Rakvere and Pärnu, and the disco scene centred in Viljandi

(Leivategija, 2018). Echoing the birth of many DM fan clubs in Eastern Europe at the time (in Russia, Latvia, Poland, and elsewhere; see Deller and Abraham, 2006; Mazurkiewicz, 2008, p. 34; EDMFK newspaper, 1994/17, p. 2), this wave of subcultural activity also included the formation, in 1992, of the EDMFK in the small town of Paide in central Estonia.

Benedict Anderson (2006) stresses the impact of the written word on the formation of communities, showing how the development of print media contributes to people's self-awareness and helps large groups of anonymous individuals imagine themselves as one nation with a shared set of values. A similar imagined community formed around members of the EDMFK, whose first rallying point was a public advertisement in the weekly youth newspaper *Meie Meel* (Our Mind, see Figure 4.1) inviting readers to join the club. The group maintained an identity through the club's fan media – a shared information field for club participants. The author of the advertisement, 19-year-old Craig (2021) from Paide, who, at the time, worked as a computer operator in the Ministry of Defence, was inspired by an article about fan clubs he had seen in the same weekly: 'I had no clue how to build a fan club or what I was going to do – my goal was to get to know people who listen to similar music, to exchange information.'

The advertisement drew replies from about 25 readers, the youngest being secondary school students and the oldest were recent university graduates. As a reference to the song 'Little 15,' the lower age limit for joining the club was fifteen. Those replies marked the club's inception, and most of my interviewees cited the ad as their way into the club. Acquaintances formed through the ad show the role of print media and the longer lifespan of newspaper news in the pre-internet age. This is illustrated by Annika (2022) from Jõgeva, a small town in eastern Estonia: 'It was before high school, at the end of ninth grade. A friend of mine recalled that there had been an ad [about the fan club] in some old issue of Our Mind. So we flipped through all those [old issues] and wrote a joint letter to Craig.'

As is common in pre-internet subcultures (Glass, 2012, p. 699), Estonian subcultural groups interacted in urban spaces like the Old Town of Tallinn, which played a crucial role in creating subcultural patterns and social relations (Wiedemann, 2019, pp. 17–23; Davidjants, 2022, pp. 16–19). Here, the EDMFK's multi-regional membership created through correspondence stood in stark contrast with local subcultural patterns. Interviewees' places of residence and club participants' addresses listed in fan zine issues and on the hand-drawn map shown in Figure 4.2 cover all of Estonia: Rapla, Kehtna,



**"Depeche Mode'i"
fänniklubi**

Kui siin Eestimaal on veel kedagi, kes huvitub ansamblist nimega "DEPECHE MODE" (fotol), siis on ta DM fänniklubi oodatud liige. Klubi asub Paides ja selle aadress on: **EE2820 Paide, P.O. Box 105.**

Oodatud on kõikvõimalikud abi- ja materjalipakkumised. Ehk avaneb sul võimalus just klubi kaudu vahetada endale midagi meelepärast.

Aga ära unusta: kui sa ei lisa tühja margiga ümbrikut, jääd vastu-
seta. Kui sul on telefon, siis pane kirja ka selle number.

Figure 4.1. Advertisement in *Meie Meel* (5.08.1992) emphasizing the exchange of information: 'Any offers of assistance or material are welcome. The club could be a place to barter and get something to your liking.' Image credit: Personal archive of Craig Tislar.



Figure 4.2. Hand-drawn map from 1997 showing club members' places of origin.
Image credit: Personal archive of Craig Tislar.

Tallinn, Pärnu, Jõgeva, Häädemeeste, Tabasalu, Saaremaa, and beyond. The club brought together, first as an imaginary and later as a physical community, both individual DM fans and smaller fan communities across Estonia. Because of the distribution of fans across Estonia, club gatherings were held at a variety of locations using organisers' available means and facilities, including spaces like their parents' workplaces. For example, Indrek (2022) from Kuressaare recalls in an interview with the author that a party celebrating Dave Gahan's birthday was held at a kindergarten in Jõgeva. The organisers' lack of experience meant that not all logistical details received the attention required to execute a successful meetup. Craig (2021) recalls the club's first meeting in Paide in 1992: 'There weren't many cars. Imagine now that some guys come by bus from Kuressaare, others from Tartu, and yet others from Pärnu. Clearly, they are all going to arrive at different times, and I had to meet everyone because they would have been unable to find the venue' (See Figure 4.3).

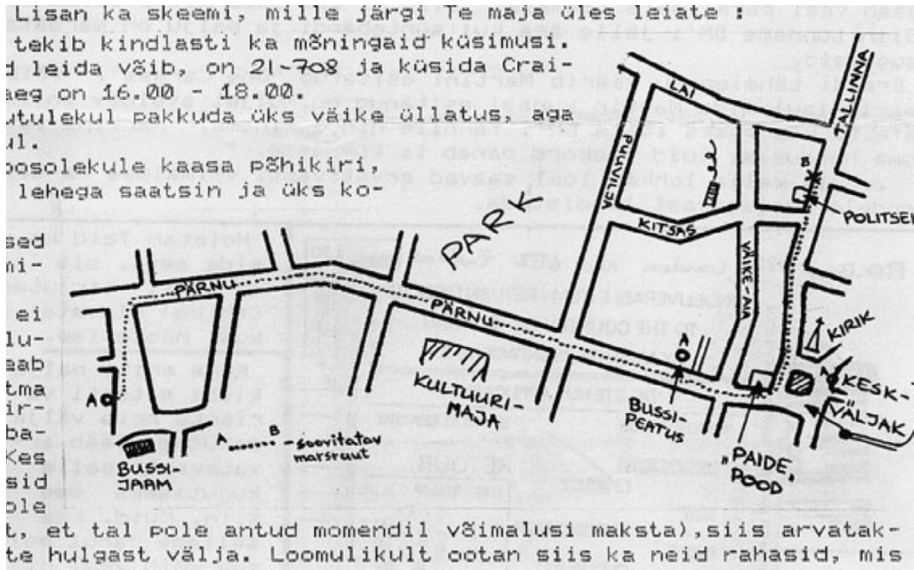


Figure 4.3. Club meetings often entailed an adventure from Saaremaa or Jõgeva to different parts of Estonia, requiring detailed instructions and hand-drawn maps (this particular map, inviting club participants to the foundation meeting in Pärnu on April 3, 1992, was published on the first page of the 1992/4 issue of the EDMFK newspaper. Image credit: Craig Tislar.

According to local narratives, Estonian- and Russian-speaking youth barely communicated and pop music life remained separate from the Soviet era until the turn of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, narratives often emphasized confrontation between Estonian and Russian youth during the Soviet period, when Russian-speaking youth represented the oppressive mainstream and Estonians the suppressed but vibrant underground. Such constructions, however, obscure the multi-layeredness of Estonia’s Russian-language pop culture. According to my research and fieldwork among members of various subcultures, this is true only to some extent. For example, authorities feared Estonian rock bands just as they did not tolerate the Russian bands, and Estonian- and Russian-speaking youth interacted in urban spaces in the 1990s even if their social circles and concert lives remained relatively separate. Russian-speaking youth were also involved in local pop music fandoms and subcultures, and most interviewees spoke of a background assumption that before DM became popular among Estonians, its fans in Estonia were Russian-speaking youth. As club members interacted systematically with

local Russian-speaking fans, the organization was successful in crossing ethnic boundaries, as well as regional borders. This situation was exceptional in Estonia, where contacts between similar subcultural groups of different language communities were occasional at this time, even if friendly. The club's crossing of ethnic and national borders is reflected in early issues of its newspaper (EDMFK newspaper, 1993/5, pp. 1–2). For example, there are articles about contacting the Latvian DM fan club by fax, followed by reciprocal visits (EDMFK newspaper, 1994/17, pp. 1–2), and trips to Moscow, where the local DM fan club held a pageant in honour of Dave Gahan's birthday on May 9th (EDMFK newspaper, 1993/9, p. 1). According to the interview with Craig, information was spread by word of mouth via Russian-speaking participants who visited club meetings.

Many interviewees also recalled close contacts with the Russian-speaking fan community in Pärnu, whose dance parties were extremely popular among Estonian speakers and documented in issues of *Devotee*, including references to Yuri Reponen's industrial and EBM dances (EDMFK newspaper, 1996/7, p. 12; 1997/2, p. 27; 1997/4, p. 4; 1997/8, p. 12; 1998/7, p. 28; 1999/8, p. 22, 1999/9: p. 16). Yuri (2022) himself perceived ethnic boundaries as insignificant: 'I didn't belong to the club, but I was close to them, an unofficial member, as Craig said. [In the case of DM], indeed, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds came together because Depeche connected people regardless of their ethnicity. However, I don't know why.' According to several research participants, contacts became even closer after the Depeche Mode bar was established in the Old Town of Tallinn in 1999, providing a shared physical space for fans regardless of their ethnic origin or native language.

Thanks to Craig's clear vision as president, the club was highly organised from its inception. He formulated the club's statutes that set out its purpose and main activities and enlisted people to serve in appropriate roles, including tasking club member (and interviewee in this chapter) Annika to write an article about her first meeting for the club's newspaper or asking fans from Kuressaare to organise the club's Summer Days on the island. Over time, some members withdrew from the club while others remain active. The club has four regular events: Winter Days at the beginning of the year, Dave Gahan's birthday celebration in May, a two-day summer camp, and the club's anniversary at the end of the year.

EDMFK Participants' Personal Narratives

Personal narratives demonstrate how individual and collective memories intertwine when people remember shared experiences about the formation of a community in conditions of newly re-independent capitalist Estonia. Nevertheless, in the case of EDMFK, these narratives also reveal and contest common (sub)cultural myths related to the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet realms concerning gender and ethnicity. In this section, I analyse the experience of Estonia's DM fans during the period following re-independence in 1991. The material here was gathered through qualitative methods (semi-structured in-depth interviews and, in the case of one research participant, an online chat discussion) from four women and six men born between 1970–1975. Several respondents are known to me personally and connected me with additional contacts who also agreed to participate. Some were members of the club, while others participated in club events without officially joining. Since Estonia's DM fan community was varied in terms of geography, ethnicity, and gender, I sought to avoid overreliance on research participants from Tallinn, and also included members who were initially from Kuressaare, Jõgeva, Pärnu, and Tabasalu. Members of Estonia's Russian-speaking community are also represented among the research participants.

I structured my analysis around topics emerging from the interviews: the role of music in research participants' lives and the transformation of musical attraction into affiliation with a fan community; manoeuvring that resulted from adopting an identity seen as alternative to the mainstream; and communication inside the community. I did not adhere strictly to the topics but rather followed the interviewees in discussing aspects of their experience as a fan and their participation in the fan club. When conducting the interviews, I followed principles of feminist theory emphasizing connection between researcher and research participant, discussing general human experience, and highlighting shared experiences as the basis for understanding (Oras, 2008, p. 17).

Additional material for the analysis is drawn from fanzines, which have been described as the common medium of fandom and played a significant role in the pre-internet age (Zwaan, Duits, and Reijnders, 2014, p. 1). Qualitative content analysis of fan club materials – the zine *Eesti Depeche Mode fännklubi ajaleht* (Estonian Depeche Mode fan-club newspaper, 1992–1995), the zine *Devotee* (1995–2001), and various other documents (the club's statutes, lists of members) – is also included. Additional background data were

obtained from analysis of relevant contemporary Estonian media: *Muusik* (Musician), *Meie Meel* (Our Mind), *Noorus* (Youth), *Raadioleht* (Radio listener's guide), and *TRÜ Leht* (Newspaper of the State University of Tartu).²

The Role of Music for Participants

My father would go on work trips to Finland and at some point brought me a double tape recorder, so I was constantly recording new music from Finnish Radiomafia and making cassettes for my friends. The radio kept playing, and I had my finger on the pause button. (Liis, 2021)

Research participants discovered DM in the late 1980s and early 1990s, often through immediate family members, friends, or classmates, or by chance on television. For most, the decision to officially become a fan followed the release of the album *Violator* (1990), which one respondent compared to a tsunami sweeping through Eastern Europe and Russia. Craig (2021) recalls:

I was already inclined towards Depeche. I wasn't a real fan, but I liked it. One evening, my mom went to see a friend, returned before ten, and said: "Hey, I got a tape from my friend that you, too, might like." It was the *Violator* and I must have played it all night. One side finished, I turned the tape around and kept doing it.

The aligning of past experiences of people from a particular social group illustrates how individual memories become collective (Halbwachs, 1985, p. 66, cited in Kõresaar, 2003, p. 9). One space where personal and collective memory intersects is in the relationship research participants have with music. That relationship was intensely personal and was reflected in narratives by stories of the importance of music as such and of DM in particular.

DM was an avenue for research participants to link their musical taste to an alternative identity: 'Rather, this depressiveness shows an opposition to the

² English names of sources are free translations by the author and are used for ease of reference instead of original names.

mainstream. It doesn't resonate with many people. Most wanted Haddaway' (Liis, 2021); 'Depeche was unique, alternative. The mainstream was Modern Talking' (Craig, 2021); 'As Marek put it in an interview, they didn't sing "baby" in every single song' (Ilya, 2022). For several interviewees, DM's music, in addition to romantic darkness and depressiveness, channelled personal hardships. As one participant said, 'Maybe it's the connection of having a slightly more complicated childhood, Martin also sings about "damaged people"' (Krister, 2021). Craig (2021) also recalled that DM's combination of sound and message resonated with post-totalitarian youth: 'It was easy to identify with. All these East European countries had similar backgrounds, full of anxiety and melancholy. They lived under a rule that was imposed from outside, they were not free, and in all of this was reflected the music that Depeche made.'

This explanation fits into the larger discourse of East European lovers of DM. Fans from Hungary, Russia, Latvia, and East Germany explained the band's regional success by referring to totalitarian or despotic experiences in their country's past – the Berlin Wall, Ottoman Empire, and Soviet Union. Additionally, they commented on DM's sound and related imagery, which combined melancholy with industrial settings, adding a touch of irony and an ominous visual aesthetic (Deller et al., 2006; Wyncarczyk, 2017). The visuals also impressed a number of participants of this study who, in their interviews, referred to their memories of seeing the film *Strange* and the concert movie *101* on Finnish TV. Liis (2021) summed up the overall appeal that the band's combination of image and music had for fans:

Depeche was different from anything I'd heard before. Most of what was played in the media at the time was *Veskimees* ['The Miller', a popular Estonian tune by beloved Estonian authors for singer, accordion, and synthesizer] from *Vikerraadio* [Channel 2 of Estonian Radio, broadcast since 1967]. namby-pamby 80s "happy people" [pop music from Finnish TV, or pompous sentimental rock ballads]. Depeche was dark, gloomy, and stoic, yet also possessed inexplicable depth and strength. Heavy metal was also "dark," but that pseudo-aggressiveness and glamour was not my thing. Depeche had such a balanced, mirthless outlook – which was tremendously in tune with how I felt. It was the secret me. An added touch of irony and cynicism. Also – me. Plus, there was so much to listen to – all those layers of sound and little details in the background. A little piece of melody that comes and goes, different rhythms beneath the main one. Sound effects – a train passing by, turning

the car's ignition key, some chains and pans, the beat of industrial equipment somewhere in the background. I was absolutely fascinated. The visuals came later, when Finnish TV finally showed the band. It was all a perfect combination. You would slip into your black outfit, and it gave you strength; it was like a suit of armour protecting you from the world; you hummed their music and knew you weren't alone – there were other people in the world who felt like you and didn't expect a smile from you.

Although interviewees strongly associated DM with alternative music, it remains questionable whether – considering the band's global success – it ever truly belonged to that scene. Regardless of the eventual verdict on that score, since culture depends on its context and space (Klein, 1999, p. 92), alternative culture, too, should be seen as a concept enmeshed in time and place. At the turn of the 1990s, the availability of information was crucial – the real underground, in the sense of a non-mainstream and non-commercial music recorded and distributed by independent labels – was not always available. Research participants reported listening to what was on the radio or television, neither of which offered a broad selection of music. Another participant, Marlena (2022), pointed to the necessity of a broad approach to 'alternative' culture: in the mid-1980s, even Modern Talking was perceived as different from the mainstream in the Estonian countryside, as it represented the Western pop opposite of popular tunes beloved by the local public.

Similarly to other subcultures (Vallaste, 2018, p. 68), several participants in this study positioned the Finnish radio station Radiomafia as an essential source of new music. Estonian TV was mentioned as an occasional source, as well as MTV, which people had access to via satellite in the 1990s. In that context, DM became 'a rabbit hole that led to the real underground, EBM and industrial [music],' explained club member Liis (2021). In a small community, the influence of specific individuals and their tastes was significant. 'Yuri was one of the key people or DJs among us... EBM and other industrial [sounds] came to the club through him and his friends,' recalls Liis (2021). In-drek (2022) describes the boundary between mainstream and underground: 'On the one hand, there was certainly a pop sensibility, and they played Depeche at dance parties in the courtyard of Kuressaare Castle. But there was also something completely different, alternative – different.'

Difficulties accessing music point to a dependence on *alternative* modes of access. Participants in this study recorded music from friends, on-demand

music-copying shops that had lists of available albums posted on the wall, radio, and even through a microphone from playback off another player. Helen (2022) from Tabasalu recalls: 'I had to sit still in the room, or else there would be a background of giggles and thumps.' In order to obtain a recording of their desired music, research participants were willing to overcome considerable difficulties. Marek (2022) recalls:

We had a small [television] studio in the water tower in Saaremaa. They were receiving all those channels from the sky; we only had MTV, occasionally. So we were knocking at their door in the evening with a video tape in hand: "They should be playing this song at 11.15 pm... Could you record it for us?" The next day we would get the tape back. Once we went across a field, knee-deep in snow, to get a VCR from several kilometres away in order to record a song that we knew would be on television in an hour. [I] didn't have a VCR at home, but had a video tape.

As participants recall, access to music improved in the mid-1990s when on-demand copying shops were replaced by kiosks that sold pirated cassette tapes imported from Poland. The tapes were cheap and the kiosks had a comprehensive selection. Access to music was highly valued by youth, who often spent most of their money on taped copies. Liis (2021) recalls:

When I moved out and started my studies, my mother would give me money for food. And what did I do with it? I bought cassettes! They took all my money[, it all] went there. So I remember the end of the month and me standing in the Town Hall Square, hoping that maybe someone I knew would pass by so I could ask them for money to buy some cheap bread.

Due to the poor availability of recordings and a dearth of live performances, an interesting phenomenon emerged; local bands and performers started imitating the music and visual style of popular Western bands. Such imitation was also common in Soviet Estonia: Ruja substituted for Led Zeppelin, Andres Põldroo for Jimmy Hendrix, and Sven Grünberg for King Crimson (Oja,

2016, pp. 11–12). As Indrek (2022) recalls, sometimes, the replacement did not have to be a band – lip-synced performances served as well:

I remember a vivid moment that maybe even had an impact on me; we had just started to fan [Depeche Mode]. Our school in Kuressaare was hosting those all-Estonia disco days. Even a disco radio was set up that weekend, covering the entire town. Groups came from schools all over the country, each with a short programme, and performed one or two music pieces. They had a scenario, a little show – usually just something funny or a parody. There was a dance party and awards were handed out, a pretty serious do, they even showed some on TV. And then there was this group from Rapla. We happened to be at a hairdressers on that day with a friend. Suddenly, Depeche members came in, only Dave was shorter and Martin should have been taller. We were like speechless – is this fantasy or reality? That night, they imitated “Strange-love” and “Behind the Wheel” from *101*. It would probably look bizarre today, but at that time, left a profound impression on us, island folk, who had never seen other fans.

Collective Identity as Fans of Depeche Mode

A few years after the club’s founding, a class teacher from the local Russian school invited me to her class, saying kids here talk a lot about Depeche, perhaps they will be interested. I managed with Russian somehow and even got a few questions. I guess no one joined the club, though. However, when I was later walking down the street in my military boots and leather jacket, someone called after me, “Try walking in my shoes!” (Craig, 2021)

Another topic that emerged from interviews was the transformation from a personal relationship with music and individual identity as a fan into a collective fandom. The club had a stable core of participants who were more fan community-oriented than others and qualified – according to Zwaan, Duits, and Reijnders (2014, p. 3) – as cult fans. Such self-perception was reflected in *Devotee* (1995/4, p. 2), with the magazine’s name explained by an all-encompassing, almost religious commitment to DM.

In joining the fandom, some interviewees highlighted a need to belong and others stressed a desire to share their love for DM and music in general with like-minded people. Often, these needs coincided. The EDMFK provided interviewees with a shared social identity as fans. This identity was cemented by shared knowledge of music (MacDonald, Miell, and Wilson, 2005, p. 323) – of riffs, lyrics, or hook lines that members were able to quote to each other – and by sharing and receiving information about the band and club activities in a common field of communication, both in DIY media and at joint events. Club events provided an opportunity to make new friends and obtain information. Indrek (2022) recalls their first visit with Marek to an EDMFK event on 21 November 1992:

We were really anxious, we thought the club meant a building where you go in and everything is ready and decorated. There was an enormous wind and Craig met us with some border guard Moskvich [Soviet car make], picking us up from the Mäo crossroad, we were 16–17. He had a room in the border guard branch office, and then there were about a dozen more people from Tartu and other places. I remember that someone had a guitar, and they played “Personal Jesus” or “Somebody.” It was like, “See, I’ve got these pictures,” we swapped and listened to music and discussed it. It was awkward but already then very special. Music and understanding the band’s members was central....

Events like the Saaremaa summer days were club highlights in the 1990s. For many, they were the first meeting with other members, or the first trip to Saaremaa island.³ In retrospect, many emphasised the DIY aspect of these gatherings. Liis (2021) recalls: ‘Everyone could be the DJ, and everything came on tapes. We chatted, and Craig gave us some quizzes... There was a stage-like thing with a DJ console, and we slept in our sleeping bags behind that stage. But we couldn’t sleep because the music was playing all the time.’ Another significant event recalled by most research participants was the 1998 DM concert in Tartu, which was covered extensively in *Devotee*. An important aspect was the inclusion of the fan club in organizing the concert. Marek (2022) recalls:

³ During the Soviet period, Saaremaa was a restricted border zone, access to which required a special permit.

One of the members of the club, Rando [a long-time member of the club and president in 2004–2008], had good relations with the organisers of the *Depeche Mode* Tartu concert. That way, people from the club could contribute to promoting the concert, and some of us also went around Estonia sticking up posters, from Saaremaa to Ida-Virumaa. On the concert day, we met the band at the Tartu airport, listened to the soundcheck behind the song festival grounds fence, and some members managed to be admitted to the grounds before the gates were officially opened. Also, there was a meet and greet with the band before the concert started.

Many participants in the study considered club events in Sweden, Finland, and Germany – which, for many, were their first visits abroad – highlights of the decade. Expectations for amenities during travel were modest and the trips were made by bus and with sleeping bags. The main aim was to get out and see legendary bands such as *Front 242*, *And One*, and *DAF DOS*. Liis (2021) summed up the magic of these events for Estonians in the 1990s: ‘When we started listening to that music in the 1980s, the idea of a concert seemed as real as a trip to the moon. You knew it [was] there, and some people have been to it, but you didn’t even dream about it because it seemed so unrealistic.’

Often, shared fandom identity intertwines with the sense of marginalisation that characterises subcultures in general (Haenfler, 2014, p. 17). In the 2000s, the line between mainstream and alternative music blurred through the internet, but in the 1990s, polarisation between alternative and mainstream identity was still sharp, and the underground was characterized by the flair of otherness. At the same time, it did not take much to deviate from the mainstream in a transition society, and socially acceptable boundaries were strict. During the transitional years when society shifted from the Soviet to the post-Soviet, the earlier implicit focus on survival as a nation and a people, became explicit which, in turn, emphasized traditional gender roles that were threatened by Soviet totalitarianism (Kurvinen, 2008, p. 13). It also, however, caused defiance among some young people. In such cases, subcultures offered youngsters an opportunity to create a collective identity that they legitimised by opposing it to the ‘other’ – the mainstream (Allaste, 2013, p. 46). For research participants, joining the club meant finding like-minded people and a sense of belonging (Jenkins, Ito, and Boyd 2016; Grant and Love, 2019). Feeling alienated from experiences in mainstream society, the club provided them

with an opportunity to turn that feeling into a positive experience. Indrek (2022) recalls:

We already had our bunch [on Saaremaa] and were looked at as a little weird.... The club was a sure place to belong. One thing was Depeche stuff, but it was as important to have links with alternative artistic types beyond the mainstream. You know, everyone desires to belong somewhere; it's human, especially for youngsters. Not that I was thinking about it all the time, but probably somewhere subconsciously, it seemed cool.

In the 1990s, Estonian society upheld strict gender roles, and deviation from the mainstream often meant maneuvering around dominant gender expressions (Schippers, 2007, p. 94–96). The EDMFK provided an opportunity for that, and all interviewees recalled the club having many young women as equal members. Annika (2022) recalls: 'I never actually felt that there was a difference whether there were boys or girls in the club;' Helen (2022): 'I've never felt threatened at our events. I don't remember ever having a problem with that. I never even thought about who were the girls and who were the boys;' Liis (2021): 'I would say that the numbers [of girls and boys] were pretty much equal. It wasn't at all just a boy thing. There were also gals from Tartu and Pärnu. They were certainly active, as DJs and otherwise.' Equal participation is reflected in the zine's membership section, which in April 1993 included 11 boys and eight girls (EDMFK newspaper, 1993/5, p. 1). Also, an early editorial invited girls to run for the board (EDMFK newspaper, 1992/10, p. 1). Presumably, the way the members came together was crucial. McRobbie and Garber (1993) conceptualize girls' bedrooms as sites where stereotypical female teen culture happens, while the streets and urban space are the domain for generalized 'boy culture.' One reason the club attracted so many girls was that they could participate from the safe space of their homes, and later felt safe in the scene. The feeling of safety and gender equality was emphasised by all members, regardless of gender, as an aspect of the club's values (The Janisary Collective, 2014, p. 82). Marek (2022) sums it up as follows: 'I guess those who joined did not want to be [tough guys and cool chicks], they wanted to be different and felt accepted.' As such, the club provided a space to deviate from the over-sexualisation of post-Soviet society, it modelled identity beyond the post-Soviet, and anticipated common tendencies among today's mainstream

youth, which is increasingly characterized by challenging binary gender identities and accepting very different visual expressions of identity. As Liis (2021) says: ‘A girl from my work said that it’s so cool – you have such a club, and you get to know the boys there. I was like, “What? Are you mocking me now?” It was absolutely not the point, music was [important]!’

EDMFK situated itself in an alternative scene in its DIY media, which focused on bands like Nitzer Ebb, Front 242, And One, Kraftwerk, Skinny Puppy, Frontline Assembly, and, to a lesser extent, radio bands such as Erasure and Ultravox. These choices resulted from a club survey in which members asked for two-thirds of articles to be about DM and one-third to be about other industrial bands (*Devotee*, 1997/4, p. 3). Letters to the editor show that members contrasted their club DJs with Estonian DJs Aivar Tõnso and Raul Saaremets. Though they were considered non-mainstream at the time, today, due to their global success, they are considered to be mainstream artists. The pair are also an example of EDMFK’s positionality in the alternative scene: ‘Concerning parties, you guys, guys from our club, are the only ones to speak of. Because these Tallinn types – the likes of Saaremets and Tõnso – have already bored me out with their house’ (*Devotee*, 1997/4, p. 29).

In the 1990s, when subcultural identity was expressed in alternative dress codes, being a DM fan was expressed by dressing in black, which served two main purposes. The first relates to a direct identification with the fan object. At the time, cinematic experience was too ephemeral to capture, and images of idols on film were always fleeting. Mulvey (2006) describes how VCRs allowed spectators to seize hold of the cinematic image. Imitating the makers of one’s favourite music in conditions of information scarcity meant, among other things, copying the details of their image in one’s own looks. The second purpose was linked to the collective aspect of being a DM fan; a shared dress code helped identify other people from the same subculture. Following any non-mainstream dress code was complicated in conditions of post-Soviet poverty. When the market economy was taking its first timid steps in the 1990s, finding code-matching clothes required creativity. The solution for most members was purchasing suitable articles of clothing at the Kadaka market⁴ and then dyeing or modifying them to fit the code. According to

⁴ The legendary Kadaka market (1991–2002) in the new residential area of Mustamäe in Tallinn represented the arrival of a free market in Estonia by offering a wide selection of cheap pirated products, from clothes to tapes and toys.

many female participants, the resulting appearance caused confusion and elicited contempt in mainstream society. Liis (2021) recalls:

I was so proud of my appearance. I even went to work for a while, gears around my neck, chains around my arm and wearing blue overalls. It was *industrial*. Then an old acquaintance saw me and asked: “What?! Are you going to a weird dress party?” I told them “You go there yourself!” There were those who dressed like this for events but for me, it was a 24/7 lifestyle.

To negotiate and resist oppressive structures in everyday life, participants often use self-directed tactics of utopian imagining and performative enactment of a ‘better life’ (Jenkins, 2013). The club’s events turned into utopian environments in which participants performed their identity as fans of DM. The longing for a better place – represented by the fan club – reveals itself in many documents, such as this report from the Nodisco party:

I can’t express it. Every word seems to tarnish my feelings... it was very much an extraordinary reality for me. Two days of eternity, a separate world that had nothing to do with this one. It was like having gone through another life... Two days with a completely different sense of time. A world which continues to exist somewhere and contact with which has receded into unattainability. I’ve never felt as good as there. Never. Nowhere. And I don’t understand why I rushed out from there, to meet August 25. (*Devotee*, 1997/4, p. 27)

Fields of Communication: Mail Correspondence, Gatherings, and Fan Media

I used every opportunity to promote the club. When a person passed by in the street wearing a Depeche shirt, I would pull them aside for a chat. Once I was buying headphones in Rapla. When the transaction was done, the seller saw my DM badge. So, I took out my fan club business card – I always had them on hand – and the rest is history [the club found a new member]. (Craig, 2021)



Figure 4.4. Liis with Depeche Mode graffiti (early spring 1995, in Kohtla-Järve).
Image credit: Personal archive of Liis Roden.



Figure 4.5. Gathering of the Estonian Depeche Mode Fan Club (approximately summer 1995). Image credit: Personal archive of Liis Roden.

One of the EDMFK's special features was forming a fan community by correspondence – first, by the fan club advertisement in *Our Mind* by Craig, second, through Craig's personal correspondence with members,⁵ and third, through the creation and consumption of fan media: the EDMFK newspaper (1992–1995) and the magazine *Devotee* (1995–2001). These forms of communication ensured the continuity of the club.

Communication via correspondence did not exclude contacts in urban space. For example, Gert (2019), a long-time member of the club and designer of the fan magazine *Devotee*, recalls how he was invited to join the club at Rock Summer (a major annual rock festival in Estonia in the 1980s–90s), where he caught Craig's eye with a band shirt. Liis (2021) noticed him as well: 'I saw a guy there who, as it turned out, was Gert. He absolutely stood out – blonde hair, real black jeans and leather goods. We had nothing back then.' Such acquaintances were not unique to Estonia – international contacts were made similarly. For example, Yuri (2022) recalls getting to know fans from St. Petersburg:

There was this market in St. Petersburg. We went there, me and my people, and we all had the same homemade Depeche Mode shirts. And there was Andrei. He turned around, I turned around – we looked at each other – and we both had Depeche Mode shirts! That's how we got to know each other. Only his shirt was authentic.

A critical detail appearing in interviews was the lack of information about pop music and culture. Fan media played a significant role in filling these gaps. As an analysis of mainstream print media shows, texts about pop culture were fragmented. The availability of information depended on whether one lived in northern Estonia and could watch Finnish TV or had access to satellite television. The EDMFK's zines supplied required information by including translations of lyrics, band members' years of birth and their personal histories, lists of records and singles, tours, interviews with band members and Anton Corbijn, and black and white posters. The news was sourced from

⁵ There was not much communication by telephone because, at that time, not many people had a landline. Another significant factor was the cost of long-distance calls.

German and Finnish pop music magazines (*Bravo*, *Suosikki*) that could be bought, for example, from the Kadaka market in Tallinn. Since many members had poor language skills, lyrics and news were translated using a dictionary. According to Marek, translations were often very inaccurate because they were made through several languages, such as from Russian zines that made their translations from English. Similarly, Marek (2022) recalls that certain articles were translated for them by Indrek's German teacher.

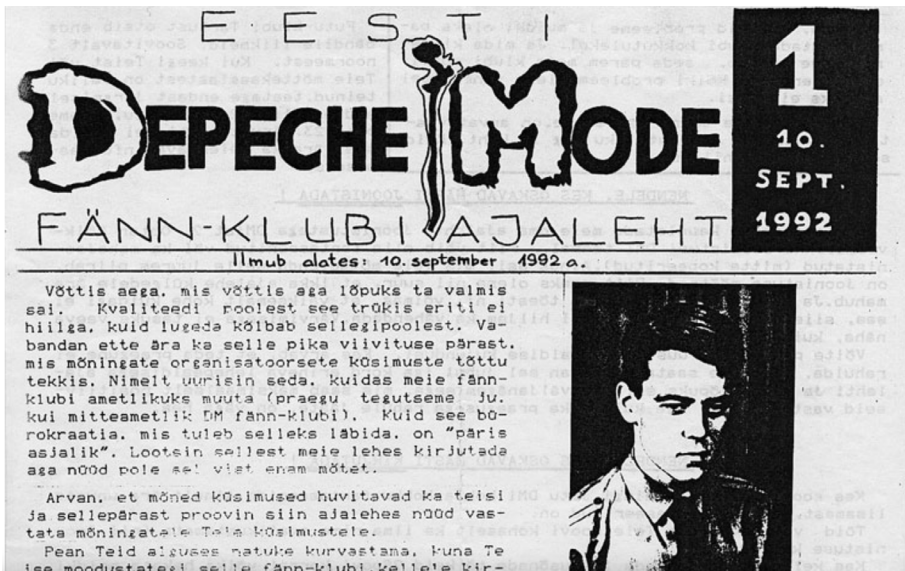


Figure 4.6. The first issue of the EDMFK newspaper (10 September 1992).

Image credit: Craig Tislar.

Participants in the fan club were in active dialogue with music, creating a shared listening experience. For example, the editor invited people to share their top 20 songs, which revealed that newly released tracks were ranked equally with some that were ten years old – on 20 September 1993, 'Walking In My Shoes,' 'Everything Counts,' and 'I Feel You' were among the favourites. Due to a scarcity of information, its news value was different from current assessments: 'Absolutely everything was interesting and it did not matter if the information was ten years old. All information was fresh for us because we

didn't know a thing' (Liis, 2021). Similarly, music was discovered retrospectively. Indrek (2022) recalls:

One of the main things I remember about being a fan was that I listened to everything afterwards. First, advertisements for the first single, "I Feel You," came out on MTV. Then came the single itself. Then came the second single. So far, this record remains one of my favourites, I guess because it came into my life at the right time and in the right way.

A significant change came after 1995 when *Devotee* replaced the EDMFK newspaper, marking an improvement in the availability of information. From that point forward, a distinction was made between fresh and old news, the latter appearing in a section titled 'Retro.'

As is common for fans in general (Jenkins, 2006), the EDMFK's members were not just passive media consumers; rather, they created their fandom as a participatory culture through DIY media. From its inception, the EDMFK's DIY media was inclusive and invited people to 'draw, write, invent stories' (EDMFK newspaper, 1992/1, p. 2). In *Devotee*, people participated as authors, translators, photographers, and designers. The writing style provided, both in the EDMFK newspaper and *Devotee*, an opportunity for interaction in an era when the web was not yet available. Marek (2022) emphasises the role of the magazine in uniting the community:

[*Devotee*] was something physical, done here in Estonia, that allowed you to be involved. It was a co-creation. Perhaps this expectation and completion were even more important than what it finally contained. It created consistency. It put out the message that this thing was real. Something that we have and others do not.

One notable mode of communication between club members was publishing bits of personal correspondence in *Devotee*. This practice shifted the focus onto people who did not directly participate in creating the magazine, but instead read it. The editor also invited members to discuss club activities such as membership fees and cards, club statutes and seal, choices for the club's

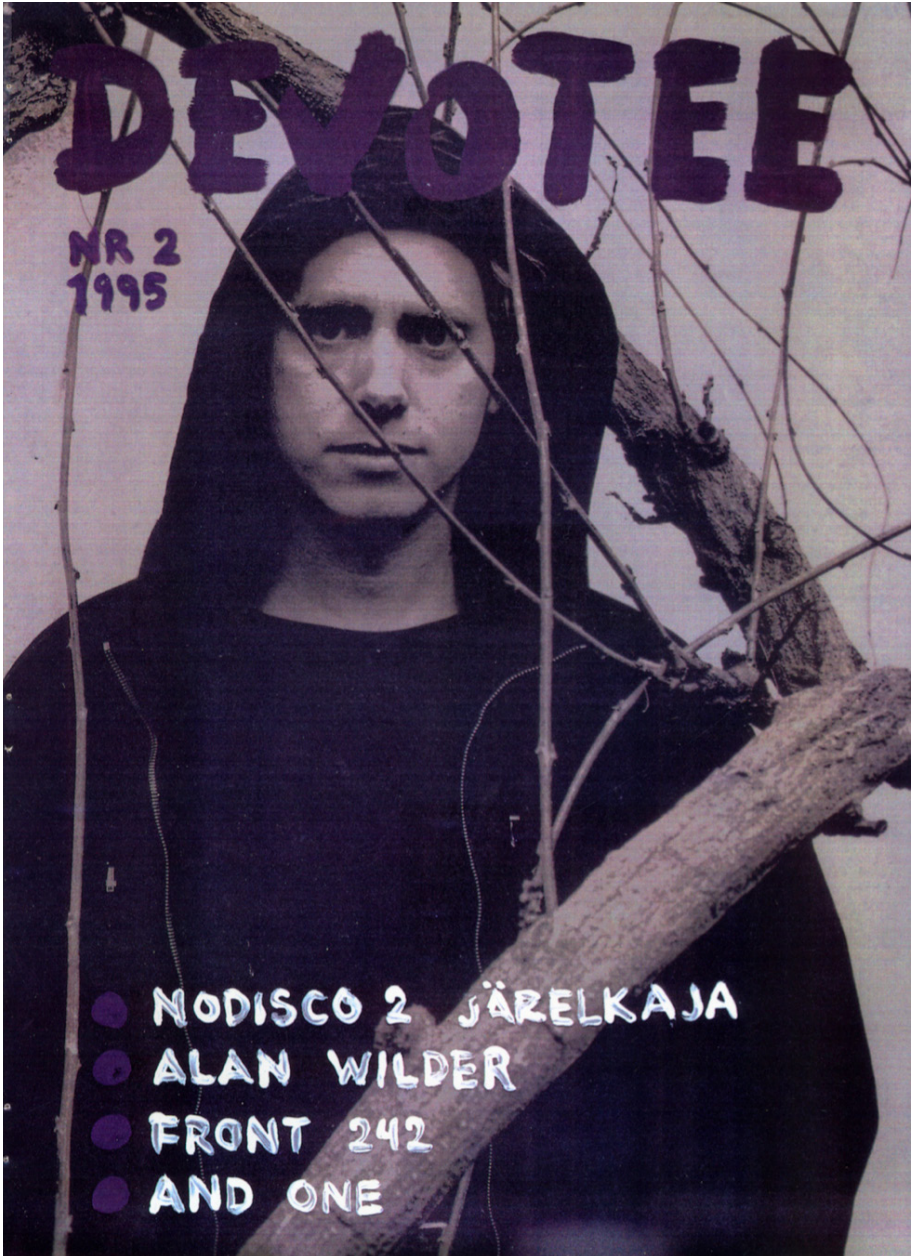


Figure 4.7. The cover of the second issue of the fan zine Devotee (16 December 1995).

name, calls for nominations to the board, election of the president, and club annals, all through fan media. Equally important were upcoming and past events: Nodiscos (a reference to DM's identically titled song) in Paide, Thursday meetings in the pub Hell Hunt in Tallinn, summer days on Saaremaa, and annual meetings in Moscow to celebrate Dave Gahan's anniversary were all announced in *Devotee*.

Conclusions

The EDMFK has all of the features that participatory cultures usually share. As is characteristic of subcultures, its members felt marginalised in conventional society (Haenfler, 2014, p. 25), and – in the context of the strict social norms characterising post-Soviet Estonia – perceived DM's music as representing a non-mainstream culture. Research participants linked their musical taste to a non-mainstream identity first as individual fans. This identity then found a social form in the EDMFK, which put them in touch with like-minded peers who shared their admiration of DM. Participation in the fan club also meant manoeuvring through the music and visual aesthetics of DM within the rigid gender roles of re-independent Estonia; young women could avoid a traditional feminine look and young men could reject the prevalent machismo. Because the club came together in response to an advertisement, people were able to join from a safe, private space. This mode of access allowed for the equal involvement of women and men, as well as the representation of different ethnic groups, by creating a safe space for all involved.

Its strong core membership (Zwaan, Duits, and Reijnders, 2014, p. 3) kept the club highly organized and attractive to existing and new members. Members believed their contributions mattered and felt a social connection with each other (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. xi). Here, leadership by prominent individuals mattered, particularly Craig who was the initiator and first president of the organization. As summarised by Marek (2022): 'If he [Craig] hadn't placed that advertisement, probably everyone would have quietly gone about their business, each in their own corner of Estonia, and I think that at some point the rush would have simply faded away, life would have moved on and we wouldn't be sitting here right now.' Craig (2021) also mentioned group spirit and a common base of knowledge as factors that united members:

Those of us who started together, we grew together with the club and as a club.... We breathed in the same rhythm for years, even when separated by tens or even hundreds of kilometres. It gave us, as fans, a common face. It made us strong and united.... It was this similar way of thinking, having the same outlook, at least in the context of the music or of club activities, that helped us grow.

Another factor contributing to the club's organisational endurance were its pre-internet foundations; activities and communication were mostly confined to Estonia because the option of directly joining an international fandom via the internet was not there yet. In-person gatherings and analogue correspondence tied people together in a different, more tangible way.

In interviews, some focused on recalling specific events, and, for others, their personal relationship with music was more memorable. There was nostalgia in research participants' narratives, for example, when speaking about music or recalling key events, but they communicated no sentimentality, as many interviewees have maintained relationships with one another. Some continued to communicate within the club, while others left but kept in touch with some members externally. Members who had withdrawn from the club often pointed out that they had stopped listening to DM after it became too mainstream, or that the role of music in their lives had changed, illustrated, for example, by Annika (2022): 'Let's be honest, Depeche is not a world wonder either, I can't even name their latest albums.' Many of those who were still active said that DM was by no means the only band in their lives but one among many favourites. In such cases, the fan club acted as a supportive institution, illustrated by Helen (2022): 'I liked many bands.... The fact that there was the fan club may have elevated Depeche a notch higher.' They emphasised that club members quickly became a group of friends, and although music still remains important, it is no longer the top priority. Marek (2022) summed up his experience:

Examining the club's electrocardiogram, it is natural there is more inspiration and "power" at the beginning, of course. And at some point, people just get older. But what unites us is that these people have grown up with the club. We used to be children, fourteen–fifteen years old. Then we had our own children, celebrated weddings and got divorced. The children grew up and started

attending events. It has been a constant development. The club's had its own crazy little mini-world, mini-life.

Overall, the personal narratives of people related to the EDMFK contest many stereotypes related to Estonia's post-Soviet realms and local subcultural movements. Together, they show how subcultural formation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and before the internet was by no means only male-dominated and urban-based. It could also go beyond the boundaries of its language group, creating inclusiveness for all participants, making it many decades ahead of its era.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the inspirational people who participated in the study. Thanks are extended to Meelis Leesik for his insightful comments. This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant 1102.

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CONVERSATION II

Latvian Folk Song – The Cornerstone of My Creative Work

Laura Jēkabsons

Interviewed by Katherine Pukinskis

Q: What are some of your earliest memories and experiences making music?

I come from a very musical background. My grandfather's brother was the famous opera singer Arnolds Jēkabsons (1902–1969), and my mother Daiga Jēkabsons (*1966) and grandmother Regīna Čudarāne (*1941) were directors of traditional folk singing ensembles. I have attended many local folk music festivals, including the famous Baltica. At the same time, I've been involved in choral music for as long as I can remember. My parents sang in a choir and took me to rehearsals all the time, even though I was just a little kid.

Q: When did you first get to know music outside of Latvia? What were your thoughts or reactions to what you heard?

I have studied music since I was six, but learning about music in school cannot compare to real-life experiences. The first concert tours, competitions, and workshops I attended with Latvian Voices left the most influential impression and inspiration with me. I have travelled the world with choirs before, but it was very different with Latvian Voices. Being part of a small group made all the meetings with musicians, audiences, and people from other countries more personal. The first thought that came into my mind was that music has no limits, especially when we think about the human voice. We can learn specific rules in music theory while in school, but in real life, there are no rules, and that was my first observation.

Q: Latvian Voices was the first ensemble for which you really got to explore composing and arranging. When and how did the ensemble form, and what were those early compositions and arrangements like for you?

Latvian Voices was formed in 2009 through an invitation for a one-time project in Germany to celebrate St. Lucia's Day. Almost all the members of the first iteration of the group were students at Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music in Rīga, so taking part in projects now and then wasn't anything particularly unusual. However, after the first concerts of the project, we were noticed and invited to a couple of festivals and competitions, so we decided to continue under the name Latvian Voices. We knew we wanted to make a cappella music but didn't have any compositions for seven female voices except from the choral repertoire. So, I took a brave step and started composing and arranging music for seven singers, a cappella. What came out was everything I had experienced in my musical life, beginning with folk song. It was my comfort zone and a safe start, which is still a massive part of my music. As I already mentioned, the idea of 'no limitations in music' inspired me to explore folk song from different angles. The other significant part of researching my way in music composition was being able to try out all the music I wrote almost immediately in the group's rehearsals to see what worked and what didn't.

Q: You won vocal group Amarcord's vocal arrangement contest in 2011. Could you talk a bit about that piece and how it was a reflection of where you were in your own musical journey at that time?

From today's point of view, it feels like the folk song I chose to arrange, 'Pūt, vējiņi' ('Blow, Wind'), played a crucial role in winning the contest. Everyone in Latvia knows that there are two anthems, one is official ('Dievs, svētī Latviju'), and the other is the folk song 'Pūt vējiņi.' Though it is a contemporary a cappella song and considered a modern approach to folk song, I wanted to connect with the traditional version that legendary Latvian composer Jurjānu Andrejs made. Therefore, in my arrangement, I quoted the original harmonization in the climax. I use a similar method of quotation and homage in many folk song arrangements, and even in original compositions. Looking back on my musical journey at that time, the arrangement 'Pūt, vējiņi' was one of the first experiments where I tried to adapt Latvian folk song into contemporary a cappella, and it led to great success.

Q: With ‘Tumša nakte, zaļa zāle’ (Dark is the Night, Green is the Grass, written for The Real Group in Sweden), you leaned into the more traditional choral influences of composer Emīlis Melngailis rather than the more traditional folk influence of the Amarcord piece. How did you think of and treat existing material in this piece?

I have a profound emotional connection and massive respect for the folk song ‘*Tumša nakte*,’ and particularly to Emīlis Melngailis’s arrangement, performed in almost every instance of the Latvian Song and Dance Festival. I wanted to connect his legacy to the contemporary a cappella world. Knowing the sound of The Real Group for all my conscious life then, the choral music approach – instead of folk music – came into the arrangement very naturally. Improvisational melodies based on folk song intonations, overtones, whispers, and transparent textures in the background voices lead to the quote from Melngailis’s version. Besides the quote from the well-known traditional arrangement, I also included another melody of ‘*Tumša nakte*,’ which is not that popular but, of course, can be found in The Cabinet of Folk Songs.

Q: Latvia has such a rich tradition of folk songs, called dainas. Could you talk a bit about what a Latvian daina is, and how they inspire your music?

Nowadays, you can find 1.2 million folk song texts (or, as we call them, ‘*dainas*’) and 30,000 folk song melodies in the Latvian National Library Cabinet of Folksongs, which are kept in an actual cabinet in Rīga; many of the *daina* texts have also been digitised and are available to search via the internet. *Dainas* were part of celebrations, daily work, and reflections on life preserved in oral form. The collection of *dainas* that form The Cabinet of Folk Songs is inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Program. For as long as I can remember, I have been singing folk songs. There’s been a folk song for every occasion, starting with celebrating the summer and winter solstices, weddings, funerals, hunts, and even sauna rituals. Folk song has been and is part of my identity, but what gives me inspiration and drive is the process of its transformation and linking to any other style or form in music and art.

Q: It was interesting for me to learn that this cabinet has catalogued so many dainas as texts, but that melodies are not always attached to the words. How have Latvian composers used daina texts in the past, and how do you think about using them in your own compositions? Where do the melodies come from? Many dainas have the same melody; one folk song could have five or ten verses, sometimes even more, depending on the occasion it sings about. The oldest

written documentations of Latvian folk songs that have survived are dated 1584 and 1632. Collecting and publishing folk songs became an important activity during the period of national awakening. Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923) is the one Latvian who was responsible for compiling the most complete anthology of Latvian folk songs. Between 1895 and 1915, he published six volumes and eight books containing 217,996 folk song texts. How the melodies have been maintained until nowadays is unique because most of the time, they have travelled from generation to generation in oral form. I believe that the appearance of the first recording devices made a huge difference in the study of folk song and traditional singing. The first Latvian professional composers appeared together with the national awakening and took part in folk song collecting and publishing. The folk song arrangements they made for choirs and many other instruments, even symphonic orchestras, are a legacy for all the Latvian composers for many generations. Nowadays, unofficially, we call it Latvian classical music. In my music, the first and most essential part is the storyline, and considering the variety that the folk song catalogue offers, it has been a fascinating musical journey so far.

Q: A lot of your music takes on strong folk inspiration, but you also have composed a number of pieces that fuse your exposure to traditional Latvian folk song with your Catholic and Protestant upbringing. I'm thinking particularly about Folk Mass. Could you talk about how these pagan and sacred influences, which seem like they could be in conflict, make their way into the same compositions?

I guess we, Latvians, at least in the area I was brought up, never saw it as a conflict. Half of my family were Protestants and the other half Catholic, but both sides honoured the tradition of folk song. My experience with the Catholic part of my family showed me that the same members of the traditional folk singing ensemble are in the Catholic church choir. Most importantly, they use the same vocal technique in both locations – the secular folk music ensemble and the church choir. There have been occasions when I've sung folk songs in church as a child, but many years later, many churches still consider it unacceptable to sing folk music in church, and the lyrics often contradict the Bible and scripture. Given that Latvian Voices' music is based on folk songs, there have been situations where we have had to submit a concert program beforehand to check if there is a song in the repertoire that has lyrics that contradict Christian values. Some of our proposed performances haven't taken place for this reason.

I wrote *Folk Mass* to show these contradictions as an essential part of my identity. I had to come back to the topic of ‘no limitations’ and put it together with the rhetorical question, ‘what is right and wrong in music in the context of the twenty-first century?’

Q: Do you receive any pushback or criticism from people about the choices to mix the sacred and the pagan? Do you think this kind of duality is more common for younger Latvian composers?

Regarding the *Folk Mass*, I’ve received lots of interesting feedback, and one piece comes to mind in particular. Latvian Voices performed the composition in a church in Latvia. Afterwards, the priest complimented the music and thanked me for not using actual folk songs as a quote and for making all the music original and legitimate to perform in church. The truth is, the last part of the *Folk Mass* (*Agnus Dei*) quotes ‘*Pūt, vējiņi*’ at least three times; he just didn’t notice it. Thinking about the *Folk Mass*, sacred/pagan duality, and Latvian composers, I have to mention the composition ‘*Missa Rigensis*’ by Uģis Prauliņš. It changed my point of view on sacred music, and I’m pretty sure it was the first impulse to think about writing something similar myself. There is no evident duality in ‘*Missa Rigensis*’ in the sense of sacred and pagan. Still, knowing Prauliņš music, I felt it in every part of the composition, and probably the music just triggered my duality.

Q: At the beginning of our conversation, you spoke about how the earliest part of your musical life featured almost exclusively music from Latvia, and that this came partially because of a strong sense of patriotism or pride in being able to sing Latvian music freely again after the Soviet occupation ended. A lot of your vocal and choral music is in Latvian, but you have also composed some works which have Latvian origins but are in English, like ‘Father Thunder.’ How did you balance the language choice with the very folk song-inspired sound?

Many *dainas* have been translated into English and many other languages. Therefore, I see it as a new possibility for creativity. Though it is easy to get lost in translation because almost all the *dainas* talk in symbols, it is still possible to manage. For example, working on ‘Father Thunder’ was very smooth because I knew the topic and character beforehand, and the translation was very musical. I think this is where actual music writing should be the last task after deciding the storyline, structure, and character. It isn’t straightforward to explain how I make a folk song-inspired sound because it comes naturally, and probably by explaining it, I will lose the magic of the process. It is like

riding a bicycle; you know how to do it, but the minute you start to think about every action it takes, you'll probably fall over. I'm not yet ready to fall, but one day I will be, I'm sure.

Q: Would you say that your music sounds distinctly Latvian?

If you asked this question to a Latvian and a person with any other nationality, I guess you would get two different answers. In Latvia, I often hear that my music is a cappella-like, groovy, Latvian Voices-like, rhythmical, stylish, understandable, and even 'democratic,' which, in my opinion, describes its simplicity. However, from people abroad, I hear it is folky, traditional, exotic, and very Baltic or Latvian. I've never planned for it to be like any of the characters I mentioned. The first thing is always the story, which takes me further to all the other 'ingredients' of making music.

Q: As a follow up, how do you think 'sounding Latvian' has changed for composers, maybe thinking back to the music that you knew and grew up with in the 1980s and 1990s?

It is not easy to define what 'sounding Latvian' is like. For some, it is traditional singing and the *kokle*, a traditional dulcimer-like instrument; for others, it is a Latvian choral sound. However, I think it is a set of things that hasn't changed since the 1980s and 1990s, or even earlier. Since 1873, once every five years, we have gathered at The Latvian Song and Dance Festival and experienced what the sound of Latvia is. Generations have changed and will change, but the sound stays, and so does Latvia. This festival is our nation's special phenomenon that has made us united and free and has brought up many great generations of composers and singers.

Q: Who are some of your musical inspirations?

At first, a significant inspiration is contemporary a cappella music, mainly because I'm a singer myself, and the fact that voice has no limits inspires me a lot. So, there are endless opportunities to explore both vocally and in terms of composition technique, very often simultaneously. I never get bored writing music for the human voice, which is why I'm still doing it. I also enjoy studying music scores from different genres and composers, but the most efficient and inspiring is to sing it, not just listen to it. So many Latvian composers have inspired me through the songs I've sung in choir since I was a child; among them are Selga Mence, Uģis Prauliņš, Valts Pūce, and Rihards Dubra. I've

been delighted to know Ēriks Ešenvalds and sometimes even benefit from his excellent advice.

I also admire composers who, like me, are singers themselves, for instance, Andris Sējāns, Irīna Mihailovska, and Līga Celma. Music is not my only source of inspiration, but also traveling and meeting people from different cultures and parts of the world. Last but not least are books. There have been many situations when I create a new composition after reading a good book. However, the most impressive book I've ever read is *Meža meitas* (Forest Daughters) by Sanita Reinsone. It is a collection of true stories from 12 women who, after World War II, participated in the anti-Soviet national partisan war and spent years as outlaws living in the Latvian forest. The composition I wrote is '*Div dūjiņas gaisā skrēja*' (Two Doves Flying) and is one of the most internationally performed choir pieces I've written.

Q: So many of these composers you mentioned are also singers like yourself. Do you think it's more common now that practicing musicians hold multiple roles: composer, singer, conductor, instrumentalist, etc? How does being an active singer inform your compositions?

In my opinion, the ability to sing whatever you have composed plays a significant role. For example, when I studied orchestration, one of the professors taught me that even if you're writing for instruments, you should be able to sing every part yourself. If you cannot do that, then there is a strong possibility that the player cannot either. Sometimes material looks and sounds wonderful on notation software, but when you start to sing it, some problems appear, leading you to make significant changes and improvements. I've been lucky not just to hold so many roles like composer, singer, conductor, and vocal teacher, but I have these incredible composer 'laboratories' – Latvian Voices and the choir Maska. Although some things work well on computer software and my voice, it changes again in the choir or ensemble. The other aspect is psychological, which means that most of the time a composer has to stay open minded. Not all the things in your head work 100% in real life, and that's okay.

Q: Latvia celebrated its centenary, 100 years as a nation, in 2018. What makes contemporary vocal music in Latvia or music written by Latvian composers today special or exciting for you? What kinds of changes, innovations, or characteristics are marking your generation of composers?

I genuinely enjoy every composer's new approach to Latvian folk song. Excellent compositions have been created celebrating the centenary, and many are still performed on concert programs in Latvia and worldwide. Every composer has their approach to folk song, and today it is easier than ever to be influenced by all that's happening in the world. For example, I enjoy the work of Latvian composer Raimonds Tīguls and his approach to Latvian folk song with a hang drum. Also, how amazing is the collaboration of the Latvian bagpipe and drum music group Auļi with throat singers from Mongolia? There are many fascinating examples of the incredible variety of how folk song emerges in new forms, and I'm pretty sure that there are no limits.

PART III:

MEMORY, AESTHETICS, AND IDEOLOGY BEYOND THE POST-SOVIET

CHAPTER 5

Lithuanian Music After 1990: From the Post-Soviet Condition to the Regime of Presentism

Rūta Stanevičiūtė

When Did the Post-Soviet Period End and What Comes Next?¹

Defining musical practices beyond the post-Soviet period requires a chronology of change over the past three decades. The most controversial issue here is deciding when the post-Soviet period begins and ends. Lithuanian cultural research tends to discuss a period of political and cultural change which, according to different authors (Trilupaitytė, 2017; Norkus, 2008), runs from 1985 (*perestroika*) or 1988 (*Sąjūdis*) until as late as 1996. Another approach, however, which has become popular in Lithuania in recent years is to interpret all of the 1990s as the distant post-Soviet past. A vivid example of this approach was the 2020 exhibition ‘The Origins of Species: 1990s DNA’ at the Museum of Modern Art in Vilnius. Aurimas Švedas (2020, p. 38), one of the curators of the exhibition, argued that the 1990s had become a thing of the past, an anachronism, a strange period when everyone was engaged in the creation of a new life in freedom. The de-heroization and exoticization of the period in question, both in artistic practices and cultural research, argues for the post-Soviet period having ended with the 1990s.

¹ This chapter was written as a part of the project ‘Moral Imagination in the 20th and 21st Century Lithuanian Music’ (Nr. S-LIP-22-60), funded by the Research Council of Lithuania. It picks up elements from my earlier article (Stanevičiūtė, 2017).

I believe, however, that trying to define the end of the post-Soviet period on the basis of local experience alone is not viable. 1989, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the short twentieth century, was the beginning of more radical global changes – the ‘posts’ of post-historicism, post-socialism, post-nationalism, post-colonialism, post-modernity, post-humanism, etc. In this context, I find François Hartog’s concept of regimes of historicity (2015) useful in defining current experiences of time and describing how past, present, and future articulate in a specific era. Hartog describes historicity as ‘an experience of *estrangement*, of distance between self and self, to which the categories of past, present, and future give order and meaning, enabling it to be grasped and expressed’ (2015, pp. xv–xvi). According to Hartog, regimes of historicity (in either a macrohistorical or microhistorical sense) ‘do not come in a series, one mechanically following another’ (2015, p. xvi), which makes it possible to speak of overlapping historical regimes and the temporal dominance of one regime over another.

The philosopher Peter Osborne associates a transformed experience of the present with the concept of contemporaneity, defined as ‘the temporality of globalization... the spatial extension of existing forms of modernization... the temporality of crisis’ (2014, p. 23). He emphasizes that art is especially receptive to conveying changes in the experience of time through questioning the boundaries and conceptual foundations of art. The processes of de-globalization, however, highlighted by the war in Ukraine, call attention to another aspect of the politics of time which, in the twenty-first century, paradoxically links globalization and de-globalization. The historian Timothy Snyder (2018) defines this as a politics of catastrophe, which, in his view, is one of the three modes of time politics characterizing transition processes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like other modes of time identified by Snyder – the politics of inevitability, which declares the inevitability of democracy’s triumph, and the politics of eternity, a revisionist ideology, the catastrophe mode echoed in Lithuanian art after 1990.

Based on such an approach, I identify four historical regimes or modes of time in Lithuanian music culture before and after 1990 – post-Soviet, post-colonial, post-national, and presentist – as dominant chronologies of transition. These are selective conditions of temporal experience that can be identified over a period of three decades, and I find them convenient for discussing the changing reflection of time in Lithuanian musical practices. The historical regimes in question are contrasting, and throughout this chapter I point to artistic practices exemplifying these regimes, which are characterized by

a sharply felt need to capture the musical and non-musical present. As the theme is broad, I use the concept of transtextuality to reveal relationships between composers' use of foreign musical material as a contextual reference indicative of agency.

From the Post-Soviet Condition to Postcolonial Memory and Critique

The 1990s were a time of endings and beginnings. On the cusp of 1990, the most important, radical political transformations determining the history of Central and Eastern Europe had already taken place – the *Sąjūdis* movement, the Baltic Assembly, the split of the LKP from the CPSU in Lithuania, *perestroika*, *glasnost*, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Ceaușescu regime, the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan, the Tbilisi demonstrations, and the Caucasian conflict. Changes in self-perception and public discourse set in motion by mid-1980s perestroika led to a gust of socially and politically engaged artistic expression. Art critic Virginijus Kinčinaitis (2020, p. 82) has poignant memories of the period as an atmosphere infused with the smell of blood, winds of freedom, and foggy timelessness:

Between 1990 and 2000, Lithuania lived through massive, tectonic shifts and chemical reactions. Frictions between institutions and a struggle over the ownership of symbols created new and unprecedented forms of energy in Lithuanian art and culture.... Everything had to be discovered anew: artistic pursuits, new ways of thinking, and new forms of community and organization.

Confronting a new reality – reconsidering the boundaries of good and evil – brought with it a critical review of authorship strategies (critical self-reflection) and the status of art in society (institutional critique). Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes argue that 'confronting the communist past often took on a more personal form as artists addressed issues of individual and collective responsibility for the ideological excesses of the failed system' (2020, p. 164). Vidmantas Bartulis's performance *Mein lieber Freund Beethoven* (1987) can be approached as the first open manifesto on Lithuanian music, mocking the

past and saying goodbye to Soviet reality. In Bartulis's performance, the fall of idols is reflected through cultural signs and musical gestures. By confronting the visual attributes of two totalitarianisms – Soviet communism and Nazis – with the music of Bach and Beethoven, which symbolized lost values, the composer created a grotesque atmosphere. In the theatricalized musical event, Bartulis himself played the main character, emphasizing the contradiction of values encoded in the performance. He is dressed as a Russian soldier wearing a typically shabby cotton and wool-padded Russian jacket called a *telogreika* or *vatnik*, a wig imitating Beethoven, and a plaster mask who has destroyed the interior of an abandoned church. The character's aggression was occasionally accompanied by the sounds of classical music from the radio – echoes of the finale of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and chords from Bach chorales (Stanevičiūtė, 2023, p. 82).

The mystery of baseness led Bartulis to adopt an aesthetics of the absurd in his Ionesco drama-based opera *The Lesson*, which the composer called post-absurd. The opera, staged in 1996, was in no way related to the



Figure 5.1. Vidmantas Bartulis and Saulius Astrauskas after a concert version of the performance *Mein lieber Freund Beethoven* (1987) by Vidmantas Bartulis. Image credit: V. Bartulis archive, unknown photographer.

Lithuanian opera tradition and seems astoundingly isolated in the context of later operatic developments in Lithuania. The aesthetics of the absurd, as well as Bartulis's active participation in the artistic process, was a response to the values-related emptiness in society left by the collapse of the socialist system. His demonstrative fragmentation of musical styles functioned as a metaphor for the conflict between individual and society. An emphasis on the author and creative biography as a topic of art was especially characteristic of late-twentieth-century, post-Soviet culture. Art critics in post-Soviet spaces tended to associate the actualization of an artistic biography and the agency of an artist with the fall of institutions after the collapse of the USSR: in a new chaotic cultural reality, artists started using their lives as the material for creation, as it was the only thing that remained for them in the context of institutional weakening and the devaluation of professional and values-based hierarchies (Stanevičiūtė, 2023, p. 84). That was why the 1990s were conventionally described as a time of actively creating biographies and new identities (Gruodytė, 2015).

In Lithuania, retrospection constantly mixed with utopia, the rhetoric of return with the declaration of (re)birth and a new reality. The sense of a changing present, of a history being created here and now, was paradoxically expressed in spatial categories. The USSR dissolved like a fictitious geographical category that attempted to cover peoples and communities no longer bound by ideology. The rhetoric of the abolition of false boundaries and a transition/return to a legitimate homeland/real Europe/normal statehood became fundamental to the formation of new identities. Confrontation with the Soviet past and processes of political transformation resonated in Lithuanian music. After 1990, a number of memorable compositions by Lithuanian composers were dedicated to the theme of Europe and, in particular, Lithuania's accession to the European Union. The period from the Lithuanian reform movement (1988) to the re-establishment of independence in 1990 and full membership in the European Union in 2004 infused these compositions with symbolic meaning, with two radically contrasting strategies for reflecting on cultural and political belonging to Europe emerging.

Among a substantial number of compositions reflecting political and cultural turning points, a cycle of compositions by the Lithuanian composer Algirdas Martinaitis stands out, starting with a declarative piece '*Serenada panelei Europai*' (Serenade for Mistress Europe) for string orchestra, written in 1999. In the composer's words, the composition was provoked by 'an increased attention to Europe – both in political and cultural terms. So much

has been written and spoken about our accession to the EU. All this inspired me to leaf through some books and reconsider my “memories” of Europe’ (Martinaitis and Daugirdas, 2011). The ‘Serenade’ commenced a series of compositions by Martinaitis dedicated to the theme of Europe, which later came to include compositions ‘*Europos pagrobimas iš Lietuvos*’ (The Abduction of Europe from Lithuania) for string quartet (2001), ‘*Le boef en Europe*’ for string orchestra (2004), the viola concerto ‘*Europos period parkas*’ (Eurasic Park, version I, 2003; version II, 2010), and ‘*Europeana*’ for string orchestra (2010), among others.

In the Lithuanian cultural context, Martinaitis’s Euroskepticism was often seen as political bravura, contrasting shockingly with his religious and concert compositions observing the conventions of art music. It is, however, essential to locate the relationship between political positioning and the processes of creating musical meaning – for instance, the relationship of the author’s political inspirations and compositional strategies. Algirda Martinaitis’s cycle of compositions dedicated to the theme of Europe was permeated by criticism of Europe as a political project: for its reinforcement, ‘extramusical subtexts’ (Bruhn, 1997, pp. xviii–xxi) or paratexts (composition titles, abstracts, author’s comments in public spaces, etc.) were abundantly used. Well-known images and symbols of the European cultural tradition were exposed in a declarative way and transformed into a political dystopia: the New Europe as a cultural dictatorship, a forge of standards, and a space of captivity. Paradoxically, the composer’s European cycle continued a slightly earlier series of compositions, saturated with Orwellian inspirations – from the Charles Baudelaire-inspired instrumental quartet *Fiori di male musicali* (1987) to *Arma Christi* (1996, for trombone, piano, bass, percussion, a hooter, and a whetstone), which, in its cultural reception, was identified with a traumatic response to the Soviet experience of time, defined by the composer himself as an animalistic creative period (with reference to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*). The composer admitted he identified Soviet censorship with the new European reality, which, for him, was embodied in the ‘proof standards’ imposed by European music scenes and contemporary music festivals.

In the ‘Serenade for Mistress Europe,’ the stylizations and allusions (to Gustav Mahler’s symphonic works, Richard Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries,’ Mozart’s music, Beethoven’s ninth symphony, Tchaikovsky’s waltzes, Maurice Ravel’s *Bolero*, and others) were de-contextualised by means of an ethos of irony (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 55). The composer selected universally known composition fragments as ‘high art’ symbols and put them into a pointedly banal

stylistic environment. Such a compositional principle was chosen to highlight a cultural message: through transgressing the 'high' and 'low,' 'dignified' and 'banal,' the marginalization of an 'Old Europe' musical tradition was emphasized relative to an increasing cultural amnesia. The composer also tended to treat the musical genre of the serenade with irony, as it was a derisive transformation of the serenade as a genre dedicated to the beloved that served as the basis of the literary abstract to the composition about Mistress Europe, 'enslaved' and raped by European bureaucrats. In the Euroskeptical cycle, Martinaitis used images of Europe at political (cultural differences between 'Old Europe' and 'New Europe,' the emotional atmosphere of EU integration, the sense of belonging to and exclusion from Europe), cultural (archetypes of Western Europe, symbols of national traditions), and musical (stylistic idioms, genre references, quotations and allusions) levels.

In contrast to politically inspired Lithuanian music, images of Europe are related to a broader reflection on cultural tradition and musical reality in the compositions of Onutė Narbutaitė. During times of change, when moving from confessional lyric (chamber genres) to symphony and oratorio (monumental genres), Narbutaitė relied on the recontextualization of the relationship between individual and collective memory. Transforming collective memory through the perspective of private memory inspired Narbutaitė's oratorio *'Centones meae urbi'* (1997), dedicated to her hometown, the verbal basis of which consisted of the multicultural legacy of Vilnius (incorporating texts in Lithuanian, Polish, Latin, and Yiddish from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries), while musical inspirations and connotations covered even wider cultural contexts and were not limited to Lithuanian traditions.

In terms of linking individual and collective memory, Narbutaitė's composition *'Melodija Alyvų sode'* (Melody in the Garden of Olives) for trumpet and two string quartets (written in 2000) was no less characteristic, commissioned for and premiered at the festival *Aksamitna kurtyna* (Velvet Curtain) in Kraków that same year. The metatexts of the composition 'Melody in the Garden of Olives' can be heard as Christ's prayer to God the Father, described in the Gospels, the poem 'The Garden of Olives' by R. M. Rilke, and religious music by J. S. Bach. These were the obvious sources of inspiration – cultural texts named by the composer and presupposed by the title of the composition. In addition, 'Melody' had a broader field of musical associations and textual interrelations (from Charles Ives to Witold Lutosławski), however, Narbutaitė formed subtle intertextual narratives by avoiding direct quotations or collage techniques. In this composition, the composer critically developed the

tradition of Eastern European expressive modernism. In Narbutaitė's work, recontextualizing the music of the past and the meaning given to memory drew the contours of a new musical present.

Post-Nationalism and Glocalism: In Search of a Lithuanian Sound

In the early twenty-first century, Lithuanian music was chaotic with no definite configuration of figures and trends. In Lithuania, the musical situation was commonly described as a collection of individual composers and creative strategies without any clear tendencies or common reference points. This image of heterogeneity also prevailed in international contexts, with a number of foreign critics emphasizing that contemporary Lithuanian music was characterized by aesthetic and technological pluralism, and that it was difficult to name prominent composers epitomizing a national sound (Goštautienė, 2005).

In this period, foreign music critics increasingly acknowledged that Lithuanian music differed significantly from the international image of Baltic music. As examples, I am thinking here of a number of reviews covering broader presentations of contemporary Lithuanian music in the MaerzMusik festival (in 2004) or Klangspuren Schwaz (in 2004) devoted to Lithuania entering the EU. It is worth noting that the image of Baltic music – an amalgamation of spirituality, meditateness, spontaneity, and minimalism – was considered an export symbol of Baltic music formed in the post-Soviet years by brand names from Estonia (Arvo Pärt) and Latvia (Pēteris Vasks).

I would associate this period of fragmentation in the Lithuanian music scene with the post-national condition, strongly affected after 1996 by globalization and the development of the internet. If, in Soviet times, the development of media prevented the USSR from self-isolation, then the expansion of new media had a radical impact on post-Soviet societies, eliminating any possibility of retreating into a national cultural space. In Lithuanian musical culture, the post-national turning point is evident in music criticism at the turn of the twenty-first century, from which a defensive vocabulary associated with a homogeneous concept of nationality was rapidly disappearing. Art critics (Fowkes and Fowkes, 2020) note that by the beginning of the new century the East/West opposition in post-socialist art had lost its relevance. Instead, questions of belonging to art scenes dictated by geo-cultural uncertainty had

emerged and the need to reflect on the relationship between local and transnational experience had arisen.

The post-national turn was first and foremost a wave of hybrid identity formation, which in Lithuanian music was symbolized by the trend of various styles intertwining with traditional music, and not necessarily with Lithuanian folklore. Paradoxically, the origins of this turn to world music can be traced back to the post-1990 work of a cult figure in Lithuanian music, the composer Bronis Kutavičius. The first referential composition was *‘Magiškas sanskrito ratas’* (Magical Circle of Sanskrit), commissioned by Šarūnas Nakas and the Vilnius New Music Ensemble in 1990 and premiered the same year at the Huddersfield Festival in England.² In the Soviet era, Kutavičius’s music was still haloed by the so-called cycle of pagan oratorios, which firmly linked his works to images of pre-Christian Lithuanian culture. In earlier decades, the theme of cultural memory was no less important in his work. Kutavičius was fond of ‘animating’ fragments of the past that had sunk into oblivion and were unrelated to romanticized, heroic images of the country’s history and ideologized Soviet historical narratives. In 1987, Kutavičius composed the last part of the early oratorio cycle *‘Pasaulio medis’* (The Tree of the World). ‘The Magic Circle of Sanskrit’ marks a revisionist turn in Kutavičius’s work. On the one hand, Kutavičius reveals an increasing interest in archaic symbols and phenomena from other cultures – in addition to the ‘Magic Circle of Sanskrit,’ particular mention should be made of the *Gates of Jerusalem* cycle (1991–1995) and *Kampf der Bäume* (The Struggle of the Trees, 1996). On the other hand, Kutavičius seems to be transposing his favourite stylistics and tools into formats quite opposed to those of his earlier work, often using self-quotation and an autocollage style. Although national themes returned to Kutavičius’s work in his later years, the multiculturalism of his inspirations, characteristic of a time of political and cultural change, signaled the lost relevance of musical representations of national identity formed during the Soviet years. At the outset of the twenty-first century, Lithuanian music criticism stated that the ‘Lithuanian sound’ discussed in Lithuanian culture for more than a century is just a branding tool (Goštautienė, 2005).

A post-national historical regime and the strengthening of an internationalized, commercialized Lithuanian art music scene before accession to the EU led to a new trend: efforts to create branding names for a Lithuanian sound. The trend coincided with a global wave of glocalism. An early, striking

² The concert was recorded and broadcast by BBC Three.

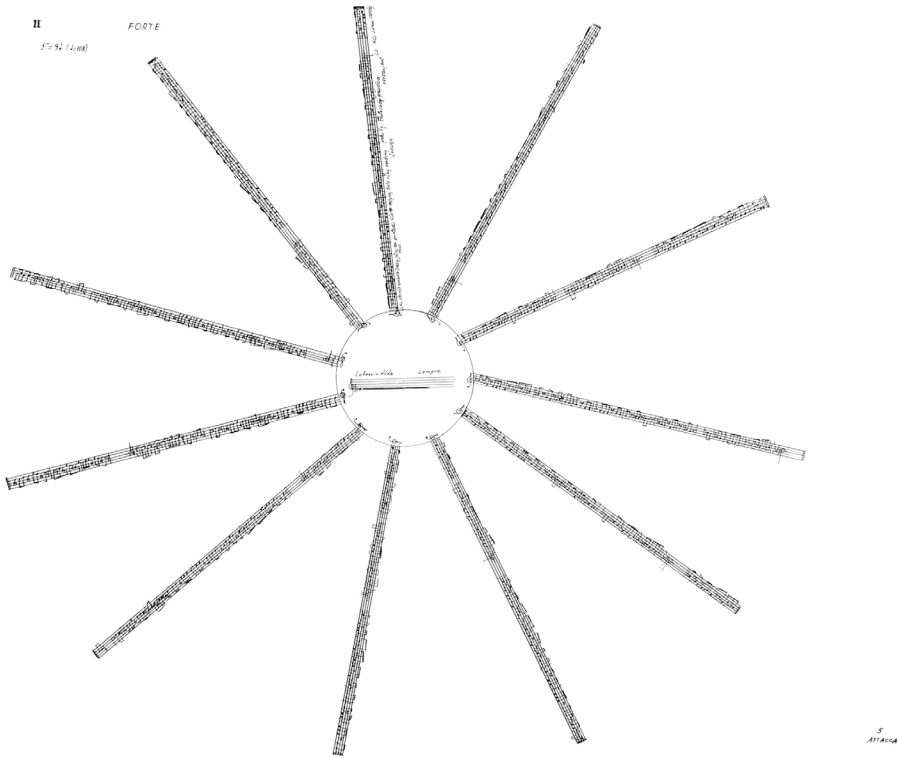


Figure 5.2. Bronius Kutavičius, ‘Magic Circle of Sanskrit’ (1990) for 10–12 voices and folk instruments, second movement. Image credit: B. Kutavičius archive. Manuscript.

example of such an artistic ideology was the composition *Sutartinės Party* (2003) by Linas Rimša, commissioned by the MaerzMusik festival. The composition was directly supervised by the director of the festival, who contributed to the formation of a Lithuanian sound in the new era – archaic *sutartinės* (multi-part songs) as the heritage of pagan Lithuania mixed with contemporary dance music.

The impact of political and economic transformation on local communities and the effects of their marginalization engender culturally engaged musical phenomena in which the reflection of local identity or the vernacular has radically departed from previous stereotypes of nationality. Music critic Yuri Dobriakov believed that, in contrast to quite a few Western countries, the folklore tradition in Lithuania did not become a museum attribute and, in the twenty-first century, keeps inspiring musicians in various genres. It is not

just an anachronistic attempt to revive the past or idealize a pagan worldview, in other words. A clear example of such music mixing are Lithuanian archaic industrial performers ‘weaving together an evasive archaic sensibility with an industrial or post-industrial electronic sound aesthetics.... Their work contains almost no direct appropriations of folk music, but ephemeral ties with the place and its timeless spirit are ample.... Old groves coexist with archipelagos of reinforced concrete modernist ruins, and electric currents feed a new tribal affinity’ (Dobriakov, 2016).

The imagined relationship with a local place, localisation, was a characteristic trait of post-national Lithuanian music. When asked about the intersection of the archaic and the contemporaneous, one of the most prominent representatives of the trend, Daina Pupkevičiūtė (artist name Daina Dieva), commented:

When I think about the Lithuanian industrial sound, I think about the people who create it. Most of us live in the concrete jungle, stark post-Soviet “sleeping districts,” and suffocate from this dull spiritless existence with its meaningless 5-day work week routine, so we feel a profound longing. We long for a variety of things, feel nostalgic about something we have never experienced or things we have never had (sometimes even bending the conventional laws of time and directing our longing into the future, longing for everything we will never see or become), and perhaps it is nature that becomes this ideal space, metaphysical rather than physical, which responds to this vague longing, filling it with content (Pupkevičiūtė as quoted in Dobriakov, 2016).

‘The past is not a natural growth but a cultural creation,’ writes Jan Assmann ([1992] 2011, p. 33). In times of change, the restoration of meaningful relationships between the cultural past, marginalized by ideology, and the present, is particularly important. According to Dora A. Hanninen (2003, pp. 63–64), ‘through the creative imagination of individual composers, recontextualization can draw rich connections between relatively isolated events’ and can transcend style and syntax: ‘[i]n this sense, recontextualization is not a kind of varied repetition but its opposite, signaling perception not of repetition but of *change*.’ In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the paradoxical recontextualization of traditional music in the popular music scene marked a radical change in national self-understanding.

Omnivorous Presentism: The Post-Conceptual Turn in Lithuanian Sound Art

In 2002, in a review of an e-music festival, Šarūnas Nakas (2002, p. 44), composer and one of the most influential Lithuanian music critics, wrote:

A different world burst in on us, without a clear origin or place, ignoring the usual etiquette, open to the reality that was promising nothing good, and full of impressions excited by the TV, cinematography, Internet, and virtual space; pretty rough, menacing, and sometimes in crying bright colors; unafraid of being accused of poor or dubious taste, arrogance, or boredom: it presented everything as it was and how it worked without embellishments or corrections. The new, not yet fully mastered aesthetics, and an approach different from the usual one. Lots of dangerous viruses from unknown sources. A decisive and natural challenge to the whole establishment ideology of Lithuanian music. With humor, though without concessions, maybe not quite consistent, but already expressed by a powerful current of passionate creativity.

In Nakas's opinion (Nakas and Merkelys, 2002, p. 48), the hierarchies legitimized in this world were primarily disrupted by the new reality of music itself, the 'musical majority' of the world, in relation to which contemporary art music was only a 'musical minority.' For Nakas, the musical majority was, first of all, various musical spaces (traditional music, jazz, alternative and experimental music, popular music, etc.) beyond the classical concert music scene, while their virtual coexistence with the marginalized phenomena of art music inspired new milieus of contemporary music, unrelated to the old dogmas and habits.

What in the early twenty-first century was documented by Nakas as a newly emerging, marginal phenomenon transformed into a dominant trend a decade later. Today, the Lithuanian music scene is characterized by fragmentation and hybridity in terms of culture and genre. The Music Information Centre Lithuania publishes information on approximately 400 composers and sound artists representing contemporary concert music, sound art, jazz, rock, pop music, post-folk, alternative music, film and theatre music,

and other areas.³ Less than 200 of them are members of the Lithuanian Composers' Union. These 400 composers are only about one tenth of the composers, sound artists, and songwriters registered with the Lithuanian Copyright Agency, and the contemporary Lithuanian music scene perfectly illustrates the historical regime of omnivorous presentism. Twenty-first-century presentism is the current experience of the present formed by globalization, according to Hartog (2015, p. xviii):

[t]his presentist present... is experienced very differently, depending on one's position in society. Today's presentism can thus be experienced as emancipation or enclosure: even greater speed and mobility or living from hand to mouth in a stagnating present. [Presentism] can highlight the risks and consequences of living in a world governed solely by an omnipresent and omnipotent present, in which immediacy alone has value.

One phenomenon stands out in the diversity of the Lithuanian music scene, which for more than ten years has attracted the attention of music critics in Lithuania, and in recent years has garnered interest abroad as well. This is the New Opera Action *Operomanija*, a platform for contemporary operas initiated by young composers in 2007 that has grown into a festival of new operas and a production house.⁴ From the very outset, this new opera movement paradoxically linked two contrasting attitudes: first, the efforts of young composers to distance themselves from the stagnation of the national opera scene; and second, the impulses of socially engaged Lithuanian art of various eras, starting with the Fluxus movement of emigration and ending with musical actions and happenings at the post-Soviet turning point. The Fluxus movement and the identification with the New York avant-garde scene had a decisive influence on the radical renewal of Lithuanian music at the end of the Soviet period. John Cage and Fluxus pioneer George Mačiūnas, a Lithuanian émigré artist, were cult figures at independent music festivals in the late 1980s and early 1990s: their works were presented at the Druskininkai

³ See the database of the Music Information Centre Lithuania: www.mic.lt (Accessed: 14 February 2024)

⁴ For more information, see the website of the production house *Operomanija*: <https://operomanija.lt/en/> (Accessed 14 February 2024).

Youth Chamber Music Festival (started in 1985), and Fluxus ideas directly inspired the Anykščiai Happenings (1988–1990). From Vita Gruodytė's point of view, it was in this environment, during the period of political change, that the beginnings of Lithuanian engaged art were formed, the apogee of which she considers to be the New Opera Movement, and especially the work of the creative tandem of sound artist Lina Lapelytė, writer Vaiva Grainytė, and director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (Gruodytė, 2021). A vivid example of such a socially engaged, topical opera by this creative trio is a work for ten cashiers, supermarket sounds, and piano *Geros dienos! (Have a Good Day!, 2011)* internationally recognised as a subtle and witty critique of the capitalist entrapment and consumerist obsession (Smith, 2011). These artists acknowledge the vibrant influence of Fluxus on their work. From Lina Lapelytė:

Personally, I was very much influenced and inspired by the Fluxus movement in my teens. Naturally, the nature of the work and the way of seeing the art field from a Fluxus perspective permeates into my current work. Play, ephemerality, situationality, interdisciplinarity are what is important today, not only for me, but also for the increasingly intersecting different spheres of art. (as quoted in Gruodytė, 2021, p. 384)

And Vaiva Grainytė:

I think I feel a certain pulse of Fluxus on a genetic level – its playfulness, its pantheistic, unregulated Zen laughter helps me not to regulate my (creative) actions, to see them in a detached way, to laugh them off (as quoted in Gruodytė, 2021, p. 385).

One more example of socially engaged work by the same team is the beach opera *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (2017) that won the Golden Lion at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019.⁵ *Sun & Sea* is an opera-performance in which an audience in a balcony watches a theatrical event on a beach with the participation of professional musicians and volunteers. Lina Lapelytė argues that the authors

⁵ The opera was produced by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė's institution Neon Realism.



Figure 5.3. Lina Lapelytė, Vaiva Grainytė, and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, opera performance *Have a Good Day!* (2011). Image credit: Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (2015).

try to look at issues of climate change, ecology, non-dominance, and gender and racial diversity from a broad perspective using Anthropocene discourse (Murauskaitė, 2019). According to the author of the libretto Vaiva Grainytė and opera director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (as quoted in Bertašiūtė-Čiužienė, 2021):

[t]he main idea of the work is the fatigue of the earth, to which we all contribute.... In the opera-performance, we see holiday-makers enjoying their daily lives and a carefree summer. However, in the process itself, we can feel apocalyptic sentiments. A presentiment of disaster wafts in like a gentle breeze.

As in the art of other socialist countries, the ecological critique encoded in *Sun & Sea* has a pre-history in Lithuanian music of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the weeds left behind by socialist industrialization and social engineering inspired Algirdas Martinaitis's *Cycle of Living Nature*, and the titles of some of the movements in this cycle became influential cultural metaphors. In the twenty-first century, the connection between environmental issues and

radical changes in human existence in the context of globalization has become more pronounced: in Felix Guattari's view, an ecosophical perspective is inextricably linked to ethical and political concerns 'through the questions of racism, of phallogentrism, of the disastrous legacy of a self-congratulatory "modern" town planning, of an artistic creation liberated from the market system, of an education system able to appoint its own social mediators, etc.' (2000, p. 34).

The links of Lina Lapelytė's creative group with socially engaged, avant-garde Lithuanian artistic phenomena are reflected in the genre specificity of their opuses, which are far from the stereotypes of Lithuanian opera. Composer Lina Lapelytė emphasized the unconventionality of interpreting the empowering opera genre as a form of a total artwork: 'For me, the musical moment in opera is just as important as the visual elements and text. Opera is a particularly favorable form of art for collaboration, but it is also an aggravating circumstance that loses its meaning if not used properly' (quoted in Gruodytė 2021, p. 383).

In the Lithuanian music scene, an opera-performance by Grainytė, Barzdžiukaitė, and Lapelytė represented a new phenomenon that grew from the condition of post-conceptual art rather than the new music tradition. Such art avoids institutionalized milieus of new music and intervenes in non-musical art spaces. Philosopher Peter Osborne (2014, p. 25) believes that

[t]oday, "contemporary art," critically understood, is a post conceptual art. What this claim means is that if we try to construct a critical concept of contemporary art from the dual standpoint of a historico-philosophical conception of contemporaneity and a rereading of the history of twentieth-century art – in its established sense as that art that is produced, circulated, exchanged, consumed and preserved within the art institutions of the global network of capitalist societies – the idea of postconceptual art appears as the most intelligible and coherent way of critically unifying this field, historically, within the present.

The creative trio of Grainytė, Barzdžiukaitė, and Lapelytė in their collective opuses – the operas *Sun & Sea* and *Have a Good Day!* – directed their imagination to a critique of capitalism and excessive consumption while, at the same time, critically rethinking the opera genre. In the Lithuanian music

scene, this was one of the strongest examples of activist art in the 2010s. Simultaneously, this creative trio revived the collective creative practice typical of rare episodes in the Lithuanian avant-garde.

Conclusions

The post-Soviet, post-colonial, post-national, and presentist historical regimes mentioned above are conditions rather than a consistent sequence of changing experiences of time after 1990. We can, however, talk about synchronic and diachronic aspects of change in Lithuanian music over the past three decades. From a diachronic point of view, we can observe a clear evolution from a homogeneous image of national musical culture fostered by music criticism towards the fragmentation and diversity of a post-national music scene intensified by a historical regime of presentism. What unites diverse Lithuanian musical practices over these three decades is a critical rethinking of the concept of art and the status of the artist in society. The circle of inspiration for musical compositions and their stylistics have changed, but the issue of the relationship between art and the present continued intensifying. Trauma, memory, identity, and value are fundamental categories important to the musical imagination of Lithuanian composers in a reality beyond the post-Soviet.

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CHAPTER 6

Lithuanian Composers in the Post-Soviet Period

Rūta Gaidamavičiūtė

Life in the Soviet Union has often been compared to an Orwellian prison; not everyone was able to maintain inner freedom, but those who survived now testify that ‘although Big Brother watched us day and night, we found refuge: we read forbidden literature, listened to forbidden music, visited illegal exhibitions, discussed forbidden topics in our kitchens’ (Narbutas, 2021, p. 28). People intuitively sensed who could be trusted and kept together accordingly, but there was also no lack of large or small betrayals.

Musical life was very much included in the list of activities controlled by government oversight; in the Soviet republics, music was centralised, partly through creative unions, which also served as supervisory institutions. In Lithuania, however, just as in Estonia and Latvia, ideological pressure was felt less than in Moscow and other Soviet republics. During occupation, art creators could experiment more freely in the three Baltic nations than they could elsewhere. This freedom existed partly because the traditions of modernism, which started in the interwar period when the Baltic states were independent, were maintained. Additionally, artistic flexibility was maintained by the efforts of progressive leaders who were not afraid to take risks. Further, due to its intangibility and temporality, music was more difficult for Communist Party ideologues to single out; composers were better positioned to create freely than writers or painters due to their medium of expression.

Before Lithuania’s renewed independence was recognized by the Western world in the early 1990s, people experienced economic blockade, poverty, and the fear of a return to the former system and its accompanying repressions. At the time of the introduction of Lithuanian currency in 1993 and

the withdrawal of the Red Army, other non-creative challenges took priority. Among them was the economic blockade imposed on Lithuania by the Soviet Union between April and July 1990, and inflation and shortages of fuel and consumer goods dominated Lithuanian attention. There was also ideological confrontation between Communists and patriots, which caused additional problems in Lithuania's recovery. Due to these pressures, the first years of independence did not see many new music compositions. During this time, however, a large amount of previously banned literature, as well as the memoirs of former deportees such as Dalia Grinkevčiūtė were published; new and very diverse periodicals appeared, with journals such as *Naujasis Žodinyš* (New Dictionary) and *Naujoji Romuva* (New Romuva) garnering attention; a weekly newspaper called *Šiaurės Atėnai* (Northern Athens) also took hold; and books by highly accomplished intellectuals such as Vydūnas, Antanas Maceina, and Stasys Šalkauskis were brought into public circulation. All of a sudden, these interesting and intense documents of life put new creative work on the back burner.

Shifting Opportunities

In addition to the social, political, and economic shifts Lithuanians experienced in the 1990s, Lithuanian music experienced its own reorganization and reprioritization. Manifestations of future changes can be seen from 1986 in alternative music festivals and conferences organised by young composers and musicologists. The weakening of Soviet ideological pressure enabled progressive composers to emerge, and some of their music found recognition through performances in Poland. Also at that time, more detailed information about Fluxus reached Lithuania via the United States, and this particular aesthetic pointed Lithuanian artists towards gestures of liberation. The Lithuanian Composers' Union was the first to secede from the central union in Moscow and became its own, independent organisation.

The stage of transition for individual initiatives and project financing was more complicated. Historically, the system for funding artistic projects was based on a practice of commissioning; artists of all varieties were paid a specific amount of money for the conception, production, and delivery of each of their works. During the time of transition in the 1980s and 1990s, however, new remuneration structures emerged, including one where artists received fees without being bound to produce anything final. This particular shift was

difficult for the older generation of artists to understand, as they had been tied so strongly to the transactional process of commissioning. New phenomena of art-making and support also appeared, including curatorship. Little by little, the first music managers and festival organisers, often without any formal musical education themselves, gained professional skills from practice and practical experience. At first, these managers and organisers were the musicians themselves, empirically learning from their Western colleagues. A decade later, formal art management studies were created at Lithuanian institutions. This career path was often chosen by those who did not necessarily practice music but instead wished to involve themselves in the field from an administrative perspective.

Since 1990, there has been a marked change in the attitude and mindset of Lithuanian performers. The relationship between contemporary Lithuanian music and its performance has been fundamentally changed by the Gaida Festival, which started in 1991. Unlike Soviet-era plenums and congresses, events like the Gaida Festival became opportunities where it was not a matter of duty but prestige to perform; contemporary music performers of the highest levels of skill and recognition took part in the festival. Since the Soviet period had interrupted the natural development of modernism, even at the end of the twentieth century there were still attempts to test the strongest and most exhausted aesthetics of modernism. The Gaida festival was the most important forum for modern music at the time. In the first decades of the Gaida festival, a lot of attention was paid to the performance of large works for orchestra (symphonies, instrumental concerts) by émigré composers in the US, mainly by Vytautas Bacevičius (1905–1970). Other composers may not have been very happy with this, as it deprived them of the opportunity to have their new compositions performed; there was usually only one concert of symphonic music at the festival. Musicologists, however, strongly supported this idea of integrating scattered, previously inaccessible heritage into the history of Lithuanian music. Gaida and other festivals actively began to include post-war avant-garde works, as they were unknown to most musicians, and performers also faced technical and artistic challenges.

Similarly, at that time, musicologists were also beginning to participate in international conferences, mastering new techniques for analysing and evaluating music. Great prospects were also opening up for young composers who began taking part in summer masterclasses given by famous composers. This practice enriched their creative biographies in a very short time frame, which was counter to the longer, more drawn-out process of professionalisation that

was commonplace for the generation of composers before them. As a consequence of these swift advancements, however, more public-facing methods of musical engagement started to lose their social significance and prestige; concert reviews and interviews with artists, for example, were less widely circulated than before. Additionally, the formation of the Lithuanian Music Information Centre followed the example of foreign countries. The organisation took over many of the functions of the Composers' Union: publishing sheet music, releasing CDs, and disseminating information about events and artists. In addition, festival and concert organisation was the responsibility of Composers' Union members.

After 1990, there were also increased opportunities to participate in contemporary music festivals abroad. This access to music and music-making outside Lithuania further highlighted the differences between traditional and more modern composers. Organisations began to favour creators whose work contributed in new, novel ways over the composers and performers who were bastions of their more historically situated craft. Professional excellence without generating aesthetically innovative ideas became unpopular and thus some older, more traditional composers stopped creating. This shift, however, also presented a boon for millennial creators. For myriad reasons, members of that particular generation had no expectations that someone else would take care of them. This younger generation of creators felt encouraged to try out many things from an early age, often while they were still students. Initiative, active career planning, relationship-building with performers, advertising, and self-promotion all became highly desirable traits among this group of creators, and those who possessed those skills were set up for success in this new creative environment. As these traits were also highly valued among contemporary festivals abroad, the younger generations of creators continue to find more widespread success than their predecessors.

The book *Muzika kaip kultūros tekstas: Naujosios muzikologijos antologija* (Music as Social Text: An Anthology of New Musicology) compiled by Rūta Goštautienė (2007) made it possible for readers to get acquainted with a broad spectrum of possible approaches to music; this publication was a direct counter to the Soviet priority of emphasising only technical analysis in schools. At the time of its publication, the content in *Muzika kaip kultūros tekstas* was primarily the concern of musicologists, but its content challenged past practices. As an example, it was historically believed to be inappropriate for composers to be in control of their own self-promotion as they could not take a non-objective stance on their own work. Goštautienė's text encouraged

composers themselves to present their ideas and creative output without the need for a third party.

The appearance of a selection of texts by well-known western scholars in the Lithuanian language was also an important addition to the country's literary corpus. In combination with the musical and artistic changes of the time, this addition to science-based research and publication triggered a linguistic shift in Lithuania. During the Soviet era, musicians who pursued formal training were taught in the German and Russian languages; all of a sudden in the 1990s, it became necessary to read English-language literature in order to keep up with many fields of inquiry.

After 1990

The period immediately after 1990 was largely compensatory, trying to make up for all the years of limited access and creative freedom. As a counter to everyday life, where there were many immediate challenges and attempts to master new procedures of day-to-day activity, artists moved more incrementally. Creative opportunities opened little by little, and composers tried to understand and incorporate principles of creativity and expression that existed in the free world. Musical aesthetics remained somewhat intact across the threshold of 1990, but the methods of work and professionalism shifted dramatically. The reorganisation of cultural institutions and their economic incapacity forced artists to create individual survival strategies rather than depend on larger systems of support. Many were not prepared to take on the role, and the situation favoured those who tended to embrace the new initiatives rather than those who held firmly to the Soviet regime.

The topic of rooting oneself in a new country through emigration became relevant both in the social and cultural aspects closely related to a Lithuanian musical language. Creators who had moved abroad were faced with an increasingly complex self-perception. The juxtaposition between possessing a clear connection with the homeland while also trying to adapt to other countries influenced both the way composers felt and the nature of their music. The change of identity was especially important for women when they tried to become established in a foreign cultural context. This dilemma was expertly documented by the Lithuanian writer Dalia Staponkutė (who lives in Cyprus) in her book *Aš renkuosi trečią* (*The Third Country: My Little Odyssey*). Up to the point of reunification, Lithuanian music was projected with a fairly clear

identity, with a distinct branch of the diaspora in the USA. After 1990, the footprint of Lithuanian music split into many horizontal branches.

Contemporary music was not a particularly popular object, and at the time of the breakdown of the Soviet regime, the genre competed for attention not only with the entire art field but also with newly emerging current affairs – the memoirs of political prisoners, exiles, partisans, the experiences of documented ‘wolf children,’¹ and other social groups previously thought to be non-existent. The breakthrough of traumatic memory was additionally observed in the literature, art, and cinema of the time.

With independence, a more sophisticated technical base emerged, which enabled a much better implementation of ideas. At the same time, works that employed various media also began to appear. Many of these pieces were created by teams of artists, or a collaboration between several people of different professions. For example, Vidmantas Bartulis’s *Dekonstruktion*, with video by Džiugas Katinas, composition by Egidija Medekšaitė, and costumes by Mikas Žukauskas was one such offering. Composer Justė Janulytė created *Smėlio laikrodžiai* (Sandglasses) in 2010, with video projections by Luca Scarzello and live electronics by Michele Tadini and Antonello Raggi. *Sandglasses* leaned into the complication of connecting art forms; the collaboration revealed new meanings and perceptions of the artistic whole.

In the early decades of independence, many brand-new ideas emerged, but it was the more constructivist trends that persisted. A parallel can be drawn here with the tradition of handicrafts in Lithuania – embroidery, weaving, and wickerwork. During the Soviet era, there was a large migration of people from the countryside to the cities. In villages, people used to do almost everything themselves. In part, this was continued in the cities because the stores had few goods and these were in short supply. Those who wanted to have something original but could not afford to purchase it took up handicrafts. Almost all women knew how to knit and crochet. There were still some weavers in the villages. The ethnographic movement encouraged collecting, researching, and restoring or reconstructing the tradition of handicrafts. This focus partly remained in the post-Soviet period. Before her studies of composition, Egidija

¹ ‘Wolf children’ were children from Lithuania Minor (Eastern Prussia; the present-day Kaliningrad region) who were separated from their families or orphaned, about 7,000 total in 1944–1948. They travelled illegally on freight trains to Lithuania looking for bread. In 1947, about 1,000 children were deported to East Germany. At first, they were called Little Germans, then Wolf Children after Eberhard Fechner’s film *Wolfskinder* (1990).

Medekšaitė (part of the team for Bartulis' *Dekonstruktion*) studied industrial textiles, so she was well acquainted with weaving techniques and patterns. It is not for nothing that other composers titled their works with terms like *Tekstilė* (Textile, by Janulytė Medekšaitė).²

These new points of contact, the expanded artistic and geographic territory, and the expanding horizontal branches of cultural connection significantly transformed the concept of nationality and national identity that had been a crucial axis for Lithuanian creators up until that point. Interactions between different arts not only enriched the work but also brought together communities of artists and audiences.

Genre Shifts

The most prominent Lithuanian authors of the last decades of the Soviet era were characterised by their existential attitude. Their best works were perceived as more than music; it was music that saved people from meaninglessness and gave hope that the inner strength within would not allow everything to fail. It also set an expectation for listeners that art was clear and unified in its intent and inspiration, which sits in direct contrast with the multiplicity of tastes and preferences in the present day. The regaining of independence diminished the singular, palpable necessity to speak from the very depths of the soul; more playful compositions began to appear, and access to information from abroad – mainly, influence from the Warsaw festival – spurred change and a diversification of aesthetic values.

Music, although having considerable professional autonomy during this time, nevertheless experienced a great influence from other countries and other arts. The most important Lithuanian music, the music that held the most pride amongst Lithuanians, was serious and heavy; painful experiences were recorded in it, but that was what made it real and valuable to audiences and performers. Belief in the positive, as well as stoically standing for the survival of one's nation – a mission voluntarily undertaken by artists – seemed as though it lost support after regaining independence. The concept

² Medekšaitė has written many compositions titled *Tekstilė*: 'Textile 1' (2006), 'Textile 2' (2007), 'Textile 3' (2012), 'Textile 4' (2013), and 'Textile 5' (2014). Justė Janulytė also composed a piece titled 'Textile' (2008). I discuss both composers in more detail later in this chapter.

of contemplative art also changed and very few such artworks are being created today. Many contemporary authors also refuse external poeticism. Some cover it with a certain irony, such as Algirdas Martinaitis in *Serenade for Mistress Europe* (1999) and Faustas Latėnas's *Samba lacrimarum* (1985), while others interject sharp harmonies or extinguish old influences with electronic timbres like Šarūnas Nakas' *Merz-machine* (1985) and *Vox-machine* (1985), Ričardas Kabelis' *Siberia* (1991), and Antanas Jasenka's *Cut-off* (1999); still others hide it in the multi-layered textures of finely divided intervals, as in Rytis Mažulis's *Mensurations*.

Among the new trends that stand out is the rise of sacred music, the growing presence of compositions by women, the emergence of experimental opera, the creation of the technical base of electronic music, and the performance of this music at festivals. Aesthetically, musical choices manifest minimalist and post-minimalist tendencies: iteration as a coordinating principle, the canon technique, monochrome and static textural, or timbral choices. Studies of micro dimensions are combined with emotionality, meditative moods and reflections on the meaning of sound.

The situation of religious music has changed in two significant ways. Historically, religious music was fuelled by frequent premiers of Lithuanian organ music. Nowadays it is written openly, but that representative instrumentation and format are notably missing. The music of religious rituals, which, in the past, was largely in the hands of anonymous amateurs, today receives little support from professionals because its applied nature does not allow composers to realise their visions within their own, contemporary ideals.

The resurgence of traditional sacred music did not last long. In more traditional musical settings, some music practitioners and communities preferred traditional compositions suitable to adapt to the liturgy. Nevertheless, the first works in more innovative styles – Vidmantas Bartulis' *Requiem* for soprano, tenor, bass, symphony and wind orchestras, mixed and boys' choirs (1989) and Felix Bajoras' *Chants of Mass* for mixed choir and organ (1989) – were very well received and long considered as signs of change. In addition, several other composers such as Algirdas Martinaitis, Kristina Vasiliauskaitė, and Vytautas Miškinis devoted themselves to this new-sacred music.

A similar situation existed in many countries belonging to the socialist regime. For instance, Eva Vičarova, while researching Czech sacred music of this time, noticed that after 1989 this field flourished in terms of creation, interpretation, and reception, writing that 'Premières of contemporary works have led to concert cycles for symphonic, chamber and vocal ensembles, as

well as numerous church concerts' (Vičarova, 2020, p. 92). Conversely, the composers who emigrated from Lithuania were viewed with mixed feelings. On one hand, after many years of isolation, everyone wanted to move on; on the other hand, losing Lithuanian composers to new countries and cultures was perceived as a danger to losing their own national identity.

Composition studies for women, which were restricted for a long time by older and outdated traditions have been consistently on the rise since the 1970s. Up until then, composing was considered a purely male profession. During this shift, female composers saw their increased involvement as a matter of prestige; they felt the drive to keep up with the modernity of musical language, and their continued advancement kept them in line with the development of their male colleagues. Much of the music of prominent Lithuanian composers who are women is full of echoes of minimalism; the hard constructivism present in the music of composers such as Ričardas Kabelis's *Rosette*, Rytis Mažulis's *Canon Sumus* or *Schisma* is not as clearly reflected.

Critics researching post-Soviet theatre have noted the expansions and contractions of national identity, the end of the era of metaphors, and the re-valuation of Soviet-time experience as artists tried to 'challenge the previous assessments of the facts of the past and ways of perception and suggest new ones' (Klavis et al., 2014, p. 55). Significant attention has been paid to critical memory, which 'never reaches a complete final state for the sole reason that the interpretations and goals of various social groups can be in an irreconcilable conflict' (Klavis et al., 2014, p. 50). It helps, however, to raise new questions and encourage different ways of using these inquiries as starting points.

Although issues of identity were relevant to the creation of art, it was not always possible to raise these topics for discussion in the Soviet era. Today, creators have been divided and self-identify their roles into several camps. For some, the activist initiatives that had for so long driven artistic practice have faded and lost momentum; others quickly realised that individual identity was a strong force that enabled them to stand firm in the new creative spheres. Social memory, too, inevitably influences the field of art and is seen on many levels. Life changes are unavoidably associated with mental changes, but they do not happen completely synchronously. Change requires time for reflection and self-awareness.

When there is a need to change one's identity or to reconcile several identities within oneself, a determination not to be hostages to history and geography becomes important. Tim Marshall's book *Prisoners of Geography* is partly devoted to this theme. Marshall (2016, p. 20) states that 'geography and

the history of how states are situated within that geography remain fundamental to understanding the world today and our future.’ The relatively small ethnic group and geographical location of Lithuania, locked between several countries with imperial ambitions, have made it a potential or real prey in the course of history. The typical landscape of the plains and small rivers means that there are almost no obstacles for invasion, even for infantry troops.

Although only three decades of freedom have passed between 1990 and today, the memory and assessments of the situation of that transitional time are also changing. Philosopher Dalius Jonkus drew attention to the fact that ‘the past is remembered differently, not because our memory deceives us, but because the past is remembered in the present and is experienced in connection with the meaningful horizons of the present’ (Jonkus, 2021, p. 20). Simultaneously, a sharp confrontation arose in response to the effects of globalisation on Lithuanian music and musicians. The reaction to this was not unambiguous and depended on age, experience, spiritual structure, among other aspects of identity. After being in a defensive position for a long time, it was difficult – for Lithuanians and for Lithuanian music – to open up immediately; interculturalism needed time to mature.

Critical Responses

As the borders of Lithuania opened, new information also accelerated stylistic changes. During the Soviet era, stagnant traditions of obligatory cultural events and behaviour penetrated not only politics but also cultural life. As a counter to the cold ritualism and ‘safe’ standards of occupation, freer models began to emerge in music after 1990. These stylistic innovations were heard on the radio and TV, at non-traditional festivals; they also reached the orchestra and theatre stages. This expansion combined with a shifting concept of what was considered beautiful, valuable, and important to shape more contemporary systems of Lithuanian music.

During the Soviet era, composers who glorified Soviet power through songs and cantatas felt confident in their work; in the years after independence, however, they fell silent and their careers came to an end. Conversely, those composers who had written minimally during the occupation but found recognition in independence often removed their Soviet-era works from their repertoire lists, wishing to separate themselves from the ideology. After each new decade of independence, publications by art critics from various fields

aimed to summarise the ongoing changes and new trends in Lithuanian music. Many of these trends were common across all arts because they took place in the same social spheres. In her summary of the first decade of independence, literary scholar Loreta Jakonytė said, ‘the Soviet era remained a significant factor in the reflection of our socio-cultural identity for the entire decade’ (2005, p. 4).

Literary critic Regimantas Tamošaitis, reviewing Lithuanian musical literature in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, says it ‘descends from the high mountains and ivory towers to the valleys and fills the city streets with the splendor of a carnival...; ‘it is becoming colourful and diverse...’ (Tamošaitis, 2010, p. 75). Sacred works such as Bronius Kutavičius’ *Jeruzalės vartai* (Gates of Jerusalem, 1991–1995), Vidmantas Bartulis’ *Nelaimėlis Jobas* (The Unfortunate Job, 2003), *Vėrinys Marijai* (String of Beads for Virgin Mary, 2001), monumental works of Algirdas Martinaitis, including his partly apocalyptic composition *Pieta* (1998), Onutė Narbutaitė’s *Tres Deis Matris Symphoniae* (2003) and *Melodija Alyvų sode* (Melody in the Mount of Olives, 2000), and Rytis Mažulis’ ‘*cum essem parvulus*’ (2001) offer links between the sacred and secular colour bursts described by Regimantas Tamošaitis. Philosopher Vytautas Rubavičius alternatively suggested that manifestations of both modernity and postmodernity in Lithuania are richer than in the West due to the experience accumulated in the Soviet era; greater diversity in the interpretations of symbols and signs made play and the use of irony more common for living Lithuanian composers than their Western contemporaries.

Composer Giedrius Kuprevičius did not cite the political and cultural shifts of the past three decades as the source of his malcontent, but instead blamed artists themselves for recent currents of music-making: ‘Artists are pushing culture out of their creative work with great gusto, offering instead only an effect, a reproach, a scandal, wrapped in a confusing artistic game, enveloped in hetero philosophical accessories and a stream of mismatched foreign words. Art without culture breeds depression in society and the idea that the world has no future and life is meaningless’ (Kuprevičius, 2009, p. 2). The emerging system of commissioning works, describing in advance what is going to be created, encouraged some composers’ eloquence when, in order to win funding for their project, they tried to describe it as cleverly as possible. Most likely, Kuprevičius also had in mind some one-time audio-visual installations that could be arranged very quickly and which the audience could not understand, and music critics or composers themselves writing about them were exceedingly verbose trying to explain them. Boundary-crossing

existed on a variety of musical stages, including in folk and professional creative works, and between poetic text and music. Recently, however, with the dominance of visual media in culture, film and especially video formats are increasingly being combined with music. This next section outlines some formidable works made in this intermedial setting.

Composer Case Studies

When a survey was conducted of composers born between 1970 and 1990, they were asked to evaluate their relationship with Lithuanian music of the pre-independence era. This particular generation offered a unique vantage point of the music as they had relatively limited, lived experience with the Soviet era. While there was significant variation in the answers, several composers were mentioned as spiritual landmarks. Composer Raminta Šerkšnytė offered that after rejecting the clichés of Soviet music and having very little personal exposure to the Western avant-garde music of that time, some Lithuanian composers created impressive works based mainly on Lithuanian folklore and their own individual, creative intuition. Due to their great artistic impact and conceptual ideas, the works of Algirdas Martinaitis, Broniaus Kutavičiaus, and several other composers were and are a benchmark for contemporary Lithuanian music.

Conceptual action as creative practice, modelled by composers such as Martinaitis and Kutavičiaus, is usually associated with unconventionality. In the Soviet times, this style was a phenomenon of the underground and did not appear publicly in Lithuania until the end of the 1980s; Vidmantas Bartulis was one of its pioneers. By combining sound expression with performances, Bartulis expanded the horizons of both his own work and all of Lithuanian music through the style of new synchronicity.

One of the most unexpected, and in a sense shocking, of Bartulis's works was 'Amen' (1992) for soprano, trombone, double bass, piano, and tape. Bartulis was offered the opportunity to present a concert of his music as part of the Vilnius Festival in 1997. The traditional concert approach did not interest him and he instead chose an unexpected, even shocking form; he turned the concert, held at St. Ignatius Church, into a play. The program included his fundamental work *De Profundis* (1988) for clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and piano, and several chamber pieces. The components chosen created a very paradoxical situation. As though it were a hall in a king's palace, the ushers at the

church door announced aloud the names of the arriving gentlemen and their spouses. While searching for their seats, the listeners could see the author's body laid out by the piano. Although audience members were clearly at a loss for what to do or how to react, the concert started. Once finished playing, the performers each respectfully sat down next to the prone author. The mourners arrived and lamented, just as people would do in typical, everyday funeral or memorial settings. Then circus performers abruptly appeared, frantically juggling as if to symbolise the continuing frenzy of life and the joys of heaven. It was at this point that Bartulis staged an ascent to heaven; he climbed a ladder to the balcony, as the festive hustle and bustle continued without him on the floor below.

In music, each interpretive action pushes coded meaning into the audience's experience. When the associations created by the author are daring and unprecedented, listeners may not have experienced anything similar with which to compare, or cannot decipher the meanings of the unexpected connotations; the possibilities of 'reading' these choices become limited, and so the audience relies only on the message of pure sound to make sense of the performance. Among the traits attributed to the post-dramatic theatre – parataxis, synchronism, play with various signs, visual dramaturgy, corporeality, invasions of reality, situation or events (Lehmann, 2010) – most of these can be found and heard in Bartulis's creative work.

Justė Janulytė is a music creator with a strong inclination toward monochromatic sounds and a slow action that is referential to naturally occurring sonic phenomena. In terms of intermediality, her work *Sandglasses* (2010) for four cellos, live electronics, and installation, is one such representation of these artistic trends. *Sandglasses* was realised in collaboration with the Italian artist Luca Scarzella. This musical work was shown at many festivals of the Réseau Varese network. All four cellos on stage are placed in visual isolation from one another; they are placed in cylinders made of tulle, like cellophane cocoons. The material of these structures blurs the audience's view of the players, making the performer's image indistinct. In combination with the slow flow of the music and the intervention of the electronics, the end result pushes listeners toward a sense of being in water.

Sunglasses is one of the most representative and successful Lithuanian audiovisual productions in the new post-Soviet era. Micropolyphony, monotony, and twilight immerse the listener in meditative listening while maintaining a cloak of mystery. The visual association with the intangible flow of time in the hourglasses, which the composer saw as measuring different sections of

time that are performed at different tempos, combines with electronic parts recorded and played together with live musicians. The moving image of the cellists in the tulle is also very impactful. As composer Martinš Vilums wrote: ‘The human ability to interpret musical processes as a kind of building of the external world and mental imagination is reliant on cross-modal connections between sensorial systems’ (Vilums, 2010, p. 281).

Egidija Medekšaitė’s name is mostly associated with textiles, and she describes her work as sonic tapestries. While pursuing her music studies in the Erasmus program at the Stuttgart Music Academy, she was given the assignment to create a piece for two pianos. About the conception of the piece, Medekšaitė writes: ‘I locked myself in a basement classroom and started sketching some fabric, thinking about how to weave it out of sounds. The idea of this work was very simple, it was based only on the system of sound pitch and rhythmic patterns. To me, the fabric is more than structure’ (*Kultūros barai*, 2018, p. 57).

Certain links with fabric patterns also exist in the unique genre of Lithuanian folk art – *sutartinė*. It is not surprising, also, that video artist Mikas Žukauskas created a visual equivalent of this work in film (Žukauskas, 2017). This source of ideas turned out to be a rich resource and Medekšaitė dove into the practice and material more than once. Different iterations of *Textile* drew from the Lithuanian *sutartinė* and *ragas* from India. Though her work could take on a visual component, Medekšaitė does not explicitly associate music with images: ‘Although textile works are woven with colourful patterns, I also perceive them as a system, not as images’ (*Kultūros barai*, 2018, p. 58) According to the composer, no matter what ‘unbreakable’ system you create, both in music and textiles, it will have a quotient of surprise, that elemental force of the natural fibres that cannot be controlled. Spontaneity and the ability to ‘hear’ nature with the whole body are reflected even in the composer’s electronic works. Medekšaitė composed ‘Textile 1’ in 2006 and has continued to produce more works in this vein, with the most recent being titled ‘Textile 7’ (2017).

The recognition of Lithuania’s cultural life in many areas on an international level is significantly delayed; though Lithuanians have been waiting for such a platform at the beginning of independence, it has started to come only in the last few years. The idealised expectation was that the music of Lithuania would be noticed and appreciated as soon as the door to freedom opened, but in reality, it took time from within and beyond the nation. Composer Lina Lapelytė’s (together with Rugilė Barzdziukaitė and Vaiva Grainytė)

opera *Saulė ir jūra (Marina)* won the Golden Lion of the Venice Biennale; this recognition, along with many other achievements earned by Lithuanian composers, help to create a sense of belonging and inclusion with common European culture. Lapelytė's artistic voice is a product of multiple points of influence. A significant influence on her work was the pursuit of sound art study in London. As a result, the factors of global politics had a considerable influence on her formation as an artist. In contrast, in Lithuania, not everyone supports global trends, so Lapelytė's work has received more attention outside her home nation. Her works relate to reality; her themes are clear and the musical language is not complex, and the minimalistic language has roots in Lithuanian tradition (Gaidamavičiūtė, 2019, pp. 28–30).

Poet, dramatist, and theatre expert Vaiva Grainytė developed the idea of the earth's weariness in Lapelytė's opera. The composer herself has said that the work is a borderline between 'pure, and clean on the brink of the end of the world' (Gaidamavičiūtė, 2019, p. 28). Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, who created the theatrical scenery for the production, looked for a space for productions in various countries where the audience could look at humankind as if from a cosmic vantage point. Each of these artists does not limit themselves to one field of activity; this multiplicity of work helps them to overcome stereotypes common in any singular field.

Conclusion

The changes after the post-Soviet period were slow to gain momentum, but the time to unpack the unpleasant facts of the past has come. The process is continuing and will continue; the revision of works of art, especially monuments in public spaces, is still ongoing. Composers have gradually waded into those musical areas and ideals which were impossible to implement before. The strong desire for information about new music has been fulfilled in recent decades; many new, outside contacts have been made as knowledge about curatorship and management has expanded.

Yet, not everything has changed so radically. Although there was a favourable environment for the spread of pluralist tendencies, certain commonalities have remained which mark a Lithuanian character of the music that is perceived abroad as Baltic writ large. With the absence of directives from Moscow, the teaching of composition to students has also fundamentally

changed; electronic music courses are also offered, methods and aesthetics have relaxed and expanded, and experimental music is written.

The philosophy of naturalism still remains among Lithuanian composers, as does frequent focus on sound with indirect cultural influence. For many composers, identity issues are still relevant to their work, and they pay careful attention to craft unique ways of expression. With the decline of idealism in society, many composers maintain their professional careers without turning to the commercial nature of creativity.

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CHAPTER 7

'A Valuable Cultural Heritage for Future Generations of Estonia-Swedes:' An Analysis of Cultural Heritage Processes Around Mats Ekman's Songs

Sofia Joons Gylling

Mats Ekman (1865–1934) was a Swedish-speaking songwriter living in Rickul, which today belongs to the Noarootsi/Nuckö municipality in Läänemaa county, western Estonia.¹ During his lifetime, Ekman's song poetry aroused a certain interest in Sweden among language enthusiasts, but not among those interested in the folk music of Estonia's Swedish-speaking cultural minority (the Estonia-Swedes²) like Otto Andersson (Andersson 1904) and Olof Andersson (Andersson [1945] 2003). The majority of Estonia's Swedish-speaking population fled to Sweden during World War II, and in Sweden, the community preserved their culture in various associations. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when the group resumed contact with their former homeland,

¹ This chapter is based on an earlier article by the author (Gylling, 2022).

² The Swedish-speaking minority in Estonia is called *estlandssvenskar* (Estonia-Swedes in English and *eestirootslased* in Estonian) or *kustsvenskar* (Coastal Swedes in English and *rannarootslased* in Estonian) in Swedish. In this article, the term Estonia-Swedes will be used for the persons belonging to or having family ties with the group of Swedish-speakers leaving Estonia during World War II. Estonia-Swedish is used for cultural expressions that the group consider as their culture, customs, music traditions, etc. There have been Estonia-Swedes living in western Estonia since the thirteenth century and when around 7000 of the 8000 Estonia-Swedes migrated to Sweden during World War II, they were all Estonian citizens.

Mats Ekman's songs were a key piece of cultural heritage for the community of Estonia-Swedes or coastal Swedes.

After World War II, major efforts were made to preserve Estonia-Swedish culture. The Uppsala Landsmålsarkiv (ULMA) was responsible for collecting campaigns focused on Swedish dialects, and the Estonia-Swedes' cultural association Svenska Odlingens Vänner (SOV) documented material that was not of primary interest to linguists. Through the magazine *Kustbon* (The Coast Dweller) and other publications, the SOV transmitted Estonia-Swedish culture within the community. In the early 1990s, new local community associations (*hembygdsföreningar* in Swedish) were formed to function as representative bodies for Estonia-Swedes in Sweden and municipalities in post-occupation Estonia. Local community associations engaged in cultural activities, and it was such an association, the Rickul-Nuckö Hembygdsförening, that published Ekman's last book of songs in 2005. A CD of these songs was recorded in 2010. In this chapter, I approach the post-Soviet period as a series of revisits to Estonia-Swedes' former home villages and a process of memory production which began compiling a revised version of Mats Ekman's songs. Moving beyond the post-Soviet, the memory production process becomes the cultural heritage process I document here.

I was engaged in the recording project as a participating musician and, as such, was introduced to the 'cultural treasure' and 'valuable cultural heritage for future generations of Estonia-Swedes' that is the latest edition of Ekman's songs (Lindström, 2011, p. 10, 182). The participating singers were all born in Rickul and sang the songs well together, happily explaining to Mall Ney, who played the reed organ and me, who joined on the violin, what the songs spoke about. Their open interest in sharing their knowledge with us led me to approach the edition of Ekman's songs within a communication process with clear senders and target audiences.

This chapter investigates how Ekman's song repertoire originated in publications and was maintained as a living tradition and cultural heritage of Estonia-Swedes continuing their lives in Sweden after World War II. I also trace how poetic texts were transmitted at different moments in Estonia-Swede history and how publications of poems contributed to constructing Estonia-Swedishness. The questions I raise here regard the actors and places that guide these processes and what the connections are between publications, the living song tradition, and the memory culture and construction of Estonia-Swedishness from the 1920s until the 2010s. This period consists of what the Estonia-Swedes today call *den stora flykten* (the great escape) to Sweden at

the end of World War II, a diasporic period when the majority of the Estonia-Swedes were living in Sweden with scarce contact with their compatriots in Estonia; a post-Soviet series of revisits, returns, and reunions; and an ongoing de-diasporization when cultural centres and political platforms were founded in Estonia by Estonia-Swedes from both Sweden and Estonia. In this chapter, I consider how the choice of a target group shaped the selection and presentation of material in the editions of Ekman's songs and follow constructions of identity initiated by publications beyond the Soviet and post-Soviet.

The research material for this case study consists of publications of Ekman's songs in book form, in the magazine *Kustbon*, and on CD. Additionally, I draw on texts describing Ekman's personality and songwriting, interviews with people involved in the publication *Prästn e vargskall* (The Wolf Hunting Priest) (2011) (see Figure 7.1), and e-mail correspondence with Mats Ekman (a relative of Ekman's who happens to have the same first name) and Ingegerd Lindström, publisher of *Prästn e vargskall*.



Figure 7.1. Cover of *Prästn e vargskall* (The Wolf Hunting Priest). Image credit: Lindström (2011).

This chapter draws on theories of cultural heritage and memory production. In order to grasp the special type of cultural heritage transmission represented in publications of Ekman's poems, I use the term *publikativt kulturarvande* or publicative cultural heritagging. By this I mean target group-based transmission through the publication of cultural heritage collections where a sender directs publication toward a target group regarded as potential cultural heirs rather than to those with a general interest in cultural heritage. In this context, an heir is a person interested in calling the cultural heritage 'my (or our) own heritage' and potentially also motivated to maintain and develop the heritage. After a discussion of Ekman and his songwriting, I analyse how songs were actualized and published during three historical periods: the 1920s, in post-war Sweden, and after the late 1980s when the Estonia-Swedish community could revisit their former homeland. During the last period, Ekman's songs became an Estonia-Swedish cultural heritage. This process partly took place after 1994, a year often regarded as the move *beyond* the post-Soviet. As part of a wider cultural phenomenon, analyses of the changing uses and meanings of Ekman's songs can help explain other Baltic cultural groups' experiences of diaspora and return to former home countries.

Publicative Cultural Heritagging as a Tool for Memory Production

The processes positioning Ekman's song repertoire as a valued cultural phenomenon reshaped and reinterpreted in different environments are of significant interest to researchers in recent decades. Ethnomusicologist Dan Lundberg, among others, speaks of a 'cultural heritage process,' which refers to how objects or phenomena are given special status as symbols of a culture (Lundberg, 2019, p. 225). By analysing cultural heritage processes, one can show the consequences of a selection process in our understanding of the cultural value of museum and archive collections. In the cultural heritage process, the status of collected objects changes alongside our understanding of them. The cultural heritage process includes a series of actions: the *identification* of a musical form, genre, or repertoire; the hierarchical *categorization* of forms, genres, and repertoires; the *standardization* occurring when publishing material; and the *symbolization* of a nation, people, or culture through musical forms, genres, and repertoires (Lundberg, 2017, pp. 62–66). An ongoing cultural heritage process includes events that redefine and transform objects or phenomena with cultural heritage status in terms of content and meaning

(Björkholm, 2011, p. 144). If a publication with collected, categorized, and, as part of the compilation process, standardized cultural expressions affects the living culture of which the expressions are part, an interplay between archive and living repertoire emerges. In Lundberg's terms, this is called an 'archive loop' (2017, p. 63).

Publications of Ekman's song repertoire have been initiated and carried out by enthusiasts in the community, and their commitment makes the concept cultural heritagage appropriate instead of the more actor-neutral, passive term cultural heritage process, which risks being understood as a self-sustaining, inevitable process (Lundberg, 2019, pp. 224–225). Based on activists' roles in the cultural heritagage of Ekman's song repertoire, I have chosen to call them cultural heritaggers. In the activation of Ekman's songs, cultural heritaggers function as collectors, archivists, editors, publishers, and practitioners.

Among the Estonia-Swedish community in exile in Sweden, cultural heritagage can be understood as a form of memory production. During the first decades in Sweden, older members' *personal* memories of the former home village and home country first became *collective* when shared with people born and raised in Estonia. As years passed and the oldest members died, the community consisted of a growing number born in Sweden without experiences in the community's former home country of Estonia. At this stage, collective memories needed to be reworked to make sense for younger members of the community. A tool used in this process was the revaluation of memories such as Mats Ekman's songs, which means they were presented as cultural heritage.

Memory production is about presenting and representing the past and absence in time and space (Ronström, 2005, p. 8). In the cultural heritagage and memory production of Ekman's song repertoire, the dynamics between active and passive aspects of cultural memory play an important role. This play has been noted by Aleida Assmann, among others (2011, pp. 123–130). Assmann categorizes cultural memories as functional or stored. When it comes to handwritten songbooks and publications of songs, these two categories often meld together. Written lyrics can be seen as stored and functional memory, which is the case when written lyrics are used for singing. In my analysis, I will use the concept pair active-passive cultural memory instead of functional-stored cultural memory. I do this to avoid misunderstandings, as the concept of stored memory can bring to mind archival collections containing songs that are sung and songs that have been forgotten. In this chapter, I point to actions striving to move songs from the passive into the active cultural memory as part of memory production.

The main purpose of cultural heritagging with Ekman's songs is transmitting songs activated by publishers to a target group for whom the publication functions as a memory activator. Publicative cultural heritagging is a useful concept to distinguish this type of transmission from other cultural heritage projects. *Publikativ* (publicative) is used in educational situations when students are tasked with creating texts to share with others rather than for teachers' evaluation (see, e.g., Sahlin and Fernström, 2010). I use the term publicative cultural heritagging to denote communication in which those who collect and process source materials do so to produce a script for publication. The focus is on a specific target group whose prior knowledge and knowledge gaps are taken into account when the script is put together. The aim of the publication is to reactivate or initiate a musical tradition in the target group. The purpose of activating the recipients makes publicative cultural heritagging similar to the archive loop.

The Singer/Songwriter Mats Ekman

Mats Ekman (1865–1934) was born on the farm of Ärtsved in Rickul in the western Estonian county of Läänemaa (see Figure 7.2). One of his arms was unusable in the aftermath of illness, probably polio, in childhood. He composed most of his poems in the decades before and after 1900 when he worked as a shepherd, postilion, and night guard at the Rickholz manor (Stahl, 1969; Lindström, 2011, pp. 8–13). Ekman was called a *bygdeskald* (village poet) in the first publication of his lyrics in 1924 (Blees, 1924, p. 1), and this title follows him in later publications (Lagman, 1969, p. 3; Nyman, 1990, p. 3; Lindström, 2011, p. 1). His texts have been called both 'song lyrics' and 'poems' since their first publication, and also 'poems that have been sung' (Kustbons redaktion, 1973, p. 2).

Ekman created songs in dialect and first sang them by heart, but after finding a discarded notebook in the attic of the manor, he began to write his songs down (Stahl, 1969, p. 8). Ekman's songs spread within the community orally and through handwritten songbooks during his lifetime (Lagman, 1969, p. 3), and some poems about childhood and youth are autobiographical. One song is entitled 'Mats Ekman's Life' and contains childhood memories and sequences from his adult life as a shepherd, yard trader, postilion, and school caretaker. In some songs, Ekman draws portraits of men and women in the area, and in others, describes old customs. In later material, he chronicles



Figure 7.2. Photo of Mats Ekman.
Detail from a wedding photo.
Image credit: Svenska Odlingens
Vänner's archive.

the effects of World War I in the area and addresses the formation of a new education-based Estonia-Swedish identity in the Estonian Republic that, by then, had attempted to marginalize Russians and Baltic German landowners. An activist stance is conveyed in songs about the destructive power of alcohol and songs intervening in disputes between the Protestant church and sectarianism, where Ekman sided with Protestants.

In poems about old customs and practices, Ekman becomes a cultural heritager documenting folk culture. His songs address well-known courtship and wedding rituals, traditional holidays, and folk beliefs. Some of the poems are 'a bit cheeky' and were not suitable for printing in 1924 (Stahl, 1969, p. 9). One song that was probably considered inappropriate for print is '*Dåbra Mare*' (Good Mare). In the song, Mare makes a dildo from animal guts and almost scares the life out of women in the sauna when she enters with the dildo on. The 'cheeky' can also be interpreted as humorous. This may explain how and why '*Dåbra Mare*' was preserved, as it appears in *Prästn e vargskall* in 2005 with both text and melody having not been printed before.

The fact that Ekman himself wrote his songs down has led to some myth-making. His first notebook, which he found at the mansion, is no longer available. Georg Stahl offers us two versions of what may have happened to the book (1969, p. 8). One version is that Ekman was taken by a religious revival and threw the book into the sea; the second version, which according to Stahl was more credible, is that Ekman had it with him when he picked up the mail in an open sailboat. It was stormy weather and when he helped the captain bail water out of the boat, the songbook slipped out of his pocket and was destroyed.

Later, Ekman probably reconstructed his songbook at the request of Jakob Blee, who published a booklet with twelve of Ekman's songs in Gothenburg in 1924 (Blee, 1924). That songbook should have been the book Stahl copied in the early 1930s when he visited Ekman (Stahl, 1969, p. 7). The publication of Ekman's poems in *Kustbon* in 1973 contains 28 songs, sixteen of which had not been published before. Nine of the texts are from Stahl's copy of Ekman's songbook. A notebook considered to be Ekman's appeared in the 1990s during the compiling of repertoire, and was later published in *Prästn e vargskall* (Lindström, 2011). According to Ingegerd Lindström, the following text was in the back of the songbook: 'Everything is so forgotten. It is easier to compose new than recall the old. I can't get it back as it was. I promised to write my life story but I do not know how to come up with it because everything is so forgotten' (Lindström, 2005, p. 9, translation by the author).

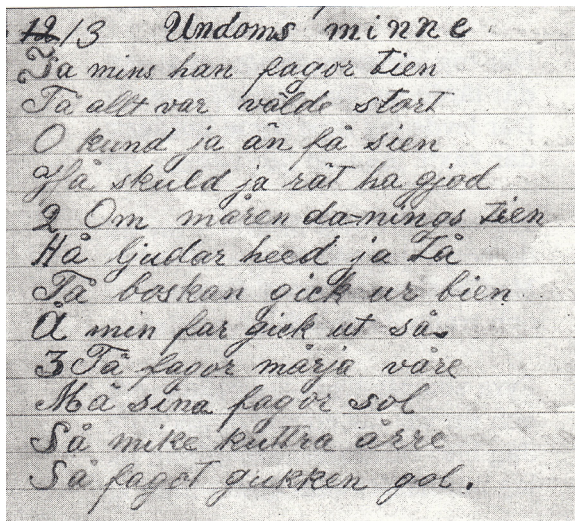


Figure 7.3. A fragment of the song 'Ungdoms minne' from the notebook. This book, which is regarded as Mats Ekman's own notebook, played an important role in the cultural heritageing behind *Prästn e vargskall*. Image credit: Lindström (2011, p. 17).

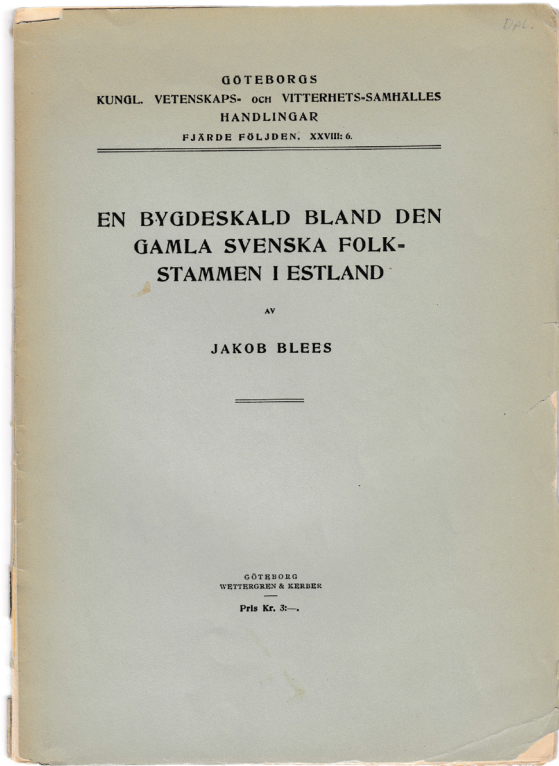


Figure 7.4. Cover of the publication of Mats Ekman's songs in 1924 in Sweden. Image credit: Blees (1924).

Publications of Ekman's Poems During His Lifetime

Jakob Blees is who first saw value in Ekman's songs and ensured that the lyrics were published in Sweden in 1924. Blees was born in Rickul in 1866 and entered the Estonia-Swedish Teachers' Seminary in 1887, but, due to the Russification policy, the school was soon closed. Blees moved to Sweden in 1889 where he graduated in theology from Uppsala University in 1901 (Aman, 1992, pp. 127–130). During his years in Uppsala, he got to know Swedish linguists and cultural scholars who developed a deep interest in Estonia-Swedish culture. One of them was the linguist Gideon Danell, who invited Blees as a companion and informant when he first visited Estonia-Swedes in 1900 (Danell, 1951, p. vii). Blees and Danell collaborated on a publication of Ekman's songs, *En bygdeskald bland den gamla svenska folkstammen i Estland* (A Village Poet Among the Old Swedish Tribe in Estonia), which was published

in Gothenburg in 1924. As member of the editorial team, Danell's tasks consisted of writing Ekman's dialectal lyrics with a phonetic alphabet.

As a cultural heritager, Jakob Blees collaborated with the Swedish museum Nordiska museet and the Swedish pan-national movement Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet (National Association for the Preservation of Swedishness Abroad) (hereafter Riksföreningen), which was formed in 1908. Blees was active in Riksföreningen after 1921 and contributed to the collection of Estonia-Swedish artifacts for an exhibition in Gothenburg in 1923 (1924, p. 1). While collecting artifacts for the exhibition in Estonia in 1921, Blees visited Ekman, whom he knew from school. In the preface to the publication of Ekman's songs, Blees expresses the view that the old folk song had been repressed by Swedish missionaries and preachers in the 1870s (1924, p. 3). Blees consistently calls Ekman a village poet, loading Ekman's songs and persona with new meaning and value. In Blees' text, Ekman appears as a cultural heritager who expresses his community's ideas, culture, history, and present in a personal way through observations and memories. Blees also becomes a cultural heritager as he places Ekman's songs and persona in a new context, assigning the author value as a village poet and presenting his songs as representative symbols. In this context, it is interesting that Blees both highlights Ekman and emphasizes his unpretentiousness. Blees writes that 'among the Estonia-Swedes, a simple village man has strayed around and made small poems in his own old language for a long time' (1924, p. 3). In this publication, there is no further information about Ekman's personality, his position in society, and his disability, nor are there published melodies. The booklet is clearly aimed at a recipient interested in language rather than music.

The selection of songs is relatively broad, although the most frivolous songs are not included. As Blees himself was a theologian and ordained priest, it is somewhat surprising that he chose to publish candid parts of the repertoire with texts describing extramarital pregnancy and witchcraft. It is also interesting that he selected a song about a priest's escapades during a wolf hunt, as it might be a humiliating, degrading song for church.

Only a few copies of the publication reached Estonia, and the publication did not affect the contemporary song tradition among Estonia-Swedes as an instance of an archive loop. Also, the lyrics in dialect were reproduced in a phonetic alphabet, which was difficult to read even for an Estonia-Swedish layperson (Nyman, 1990, p. 3). On the other hand, a couple of lyrics were republished by Emil Adalberth. Adalberth was from Sweden and worked as a teacher and later as rector at Birka's Agricultural School for Estonia-Swedish

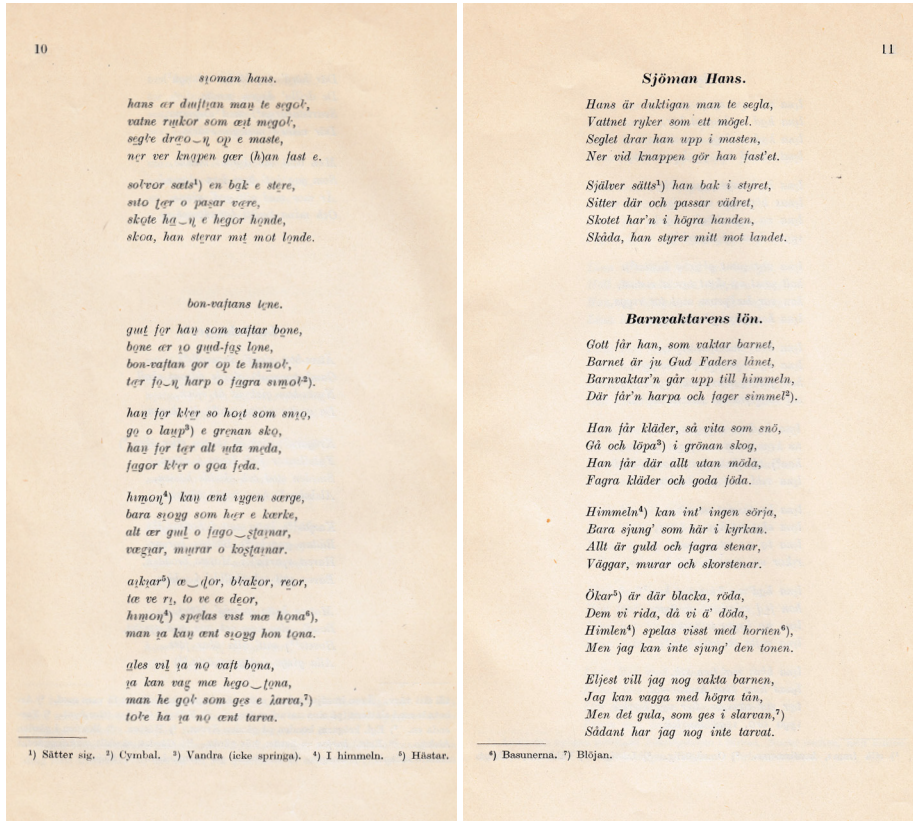


Figure 7.5. An example of how the lyrics were printed in 1924. To the left, the lyrics in dialect are reproduced with the phonetic alphabet and, to the right, the same lyrics are translated into standard Swedish and printed with the Latin alphabet. Image credit: Blees (1924, pp. 10–11).

youth during the second half of the 1920s. Adalberth presented two of Ekman's texts as poems in an Estonia-Swedish poetry anthology (Adalberth, 1927) and two as songs in a book for students at Birka's Agricultural School (Adalberth, 1928). These two projects were published in Estonia with the aim of spreading locally.

Ekman's Songs as Memory Production

The Estonia-Swedes' escape across the Baltic Sea during World War II is significant in that a majority of the Swedish-speaking population group of about 7,000 people fled Estonia. During the Soviet era, Estonia-Swedes in Sweden had very limited contact with their homeland and the approximately 1,000 Estonia-Swedes who stayed. The Estonia-Swedes who previously moved to Sweden for work and studies established the association *Estlandssvenska föreningen* (Estonia-Swedish Association) in 1938 (Kustbons redaction, 1939, p. 1). The social gatherings organized by this association became important meeting places for the newly arrived Estonia-Swedes after 1944 (Aman, 1968, p. 17). After SOV was re-established as an association in Sweden in 1945, its activities consisted of gathering Estonia-Swedes around common cultural interests and maintaining contact with Estonia-Swedes in different parts of Sweden (Lagman, 1945, p. 1). In the cultural field, SOV's role was a combination of collection and transmission (Lagman, 1945, p. 2). I see these processes as central to memory production. Compared to SOV's focus before World War II, a focus on developing culture changed to preserving culture and memory production. As this major reorientation was made, SOV remained an important hub for the maintenance of Estonia-Swedish community and identity before, during, and beyond the Soviet period. In the 1940s, Estonia-Swedes and culture organizations like the *Nordiska museet* and *Uppsala Landsmålsarkiv*, the dialect archive in Uppsala, sensed that Estonia-Swedish culture was threatened and at risk of disappearing due to new living conditions. These organizations contacted Estonia-Swedes in 1944 to promote the preservation of their culture through the systematic collection of dialects, artifacts, and memories.

Paralleling the systematic collection of Estonia-Swedish culture, joint memory production gained momentum in the community's life in Sweden. The Estonia-Swedish associations offered venues for sharing experiences and memories of the war, escape, and life in the now-abandoned homeland, Estonia. Ekman's living relatives Mats and Lennart Ekman describe how Ekman's songs were used in Sweden after the war (Ekman, e-mail correspondence, 30 December 2019). They emphasized how Ekman's songs were sung wherever people from Rickul met during the late 1940s and the 1950s. The common song repertoire was dominated by Ekman's songs, but other songs and hymns were sung as well. It was not uncommon that people burst into tears while singing. All the songs were sung by heart, and since Ekman's songs often have many verses, many became silent in the middle of the song if they couldn't

remember the entire text. Mats Ekman and his father Lennart recall that Ekman's songs were sung during happy and pleasant circumstances before the war in Estonia, but that the singing had an almost therapeutic function during the first years in Sweden. Later in his e-mail, Mats Ekman uses the term 'half-forgetfulness' to describe what happened to Estonia-Swedish culture when the standard of living increased. As part of the group's cultural integration in Sweden, the old pre-war culture began to fall into oblivion. You could sing one of Ekman's songs at a family party just for fun, but not with the same feeling as before. As part of the process of integration, which in most cases was cultural assimilation, the songs slipped out of the active cultural memory. Memory production then changed media from oral transmission to print publication in order to keep the songs and knowledge about them in active memory. For the older persons at this stage, publications echoed feelings that once had united and strengthened the community in an unreflective way. One could even go further and say that for SOV, maintaining the feeling of belonging to the Estonia-Swedish community was even more important than the preserving of culture. For the community around SOV, culture was most of all a tool to keep the community together.

In 1945, the cultural association SOV was re-established in Sweden and took over as publishers of the magazine *Kustbon*, which served as a communicative hub for Estonia-Swedes in Sweden. In 1957, SOV published the songbook *Du sköna sång* (You Fine Song), which contains seven of the twelve texts by Ekman in Blee's publication from 1924. This time, the lyrics are written in dialect in the Latin alphabet without translation into Swedish. The songbook lacks musical notation, which may owe to the fact that the selected songs were generally known among Estonia-Swedes, who were active in community life.

In 1969, two articles about Ekman were published in *Kustbon*. The first was written by Edvin Lagman (1919–2001), who was born in Estonia and later became a philologist of Estonia-Swedish dialects. Like Blee, Lagman presents Ekman as a village poet and places his lyrics in literary and linguistic context. According to Lagman, the problem for a village poet is that the readership is limited to those who know the dialect (Lagman, 1969, p. 3). Lagman's article is aimed at older members of the community who remember Ekman's songs from their youth. Lagman is also of the opinion that younger generations of Swedes in Sweden cannot understand the songs as the older Estonia-Swedes understand them.

The second article about Ekman is written by Georg Stahl, who arrived in Sweden from Estonia in the mid-1960s. Stahl was writing poetry in the 1920s

and was represented in Emil Adalberth's Estonia-Swedish poetry anthology in 1927. Stahl is an exception that confirms the rule of limited contact with the former homeland. During the final phase of the war, Stahl was mobilized in the Red Army and arrived in Sweden in 1965 (Brunberg in an interview on 12 November 2019). In his article about Ekman and his songs, Stahl highlights the bonds between songs and home-villages in a way that makes the lyrics appear as models of the former home villages and landscape.

Stahl is the first to mention the songs' melodies. He sees the lyrics as Ekman's personal expression and the melodies as based on an older living tradition, which is not entirely unproblematic. On the one hand, Stahl repeats the idea that folk songs were extinct among Estonia-Swedes in the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, he states that Ekman learned a few melodies from an old woman in Rickul during the second half of the nineteenth century (Stahl, 1969, p. 8). Stahl offers Ekman's happy, open personality and language skills as an explanation of why his poems became popular during his lifetime, aided by the fact that Ekman lived and worked in the rural centre, the manor house (Stahl, 1969, p. 7). According to Stahl, Ekman had his own written versions of his lyrics, which Stahl copied during a visit in the early 1930s. This copy became a starting point for Stahl in the compilation of a new revised version of Ekman's song repertoire (*Kustbons redaction*, 1973, p. 2). Twelve of the twenty-six lyrics had already been published in Blee's edition from 1924. Ekman told Stahl that the lyrics had been changed in the publication, and Stahl replaced five of the versions in Blee's edition with versions he copied himself. The differences are not significant and might well be the editing of either Gideon Danell or Blee. It is also possible that Blee received a parallel version of the song or that either Blee or Stahl had simply not made a perfect copy of the lyrics. Ekman's reaction when he saw his texts in print may also owe to the fact that the lyrics were written phonetically and he simply could not read them. Some of the lyrics added in *Kustbon* were created after Blee's edition was published in 1924.

Ekman's lyrics are generally referred to as 'poems' in *Kustbon*, even though the preface states that 'many have lived their own lives as folklore, sung to different melodies with re-composed lyrics' (*Kustbons redaction*, 1973, p. 2). It should be added that 'folklore' sounds more anonymous than was the case within the limited group of former Rickul residents in Sweden. The lyrics are in dialect without translation into Swedish. This edition can thus be interpreted primarily as a memory production intended for the older generation of Estonia-Swedes who knew the songs and the dialect and were assumed to have

read or have access to previously published articles about Ekman. One detail that indicates a connection between Stahl's text and the oral storytelling tradition is a mention of Ekman's disabled arm, which was a well-known fact in the community but was not mentioned in the 1924 edition of Ekman's songs.

Ekman's Songs as Cultural Heritage

In the late 1980s, Estonia-Swedes in Sweden had new opportunities to visit their former homeland, and after Estonia restored its independence in 1991, they were able to apply for the return of family property such as farms and land. These new opportunities meant a concrete reclamation of the Estonia-Swede homeland, bringing to life memories from childhood and youth in Rickul. For Estonia-Swedes, the post-Soviet moment differed from other groups in the Baltics as a majority of persons with Estonia-Swedish identity and family ties to Estonia-Swedish areas were based and rooted abroad. Although many Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians fled their home countries, the majority continued life at home during Soviet occupation. For Estonia-Swedes, the post-Soviet consisted of revisits, returns and, in some cases, reclamation. Seen as cultural transition, post-Soviet meant a growing interest in family and community history in Estonia, and joint activities strengthened the community from inside. Organizations such as SOV benefitted from this awakened interest in strengthening feelings of belonging. Older generations wanted to share their memories, and younger Estonia-Swedes wanted to listen, read, and learn. Ekman's songs and stories moved from passive to active cultural memory, and residents placed a memorial stone to Ekman's memory next to Roslep's chapel in Rickul during one of the first joint revisits. The stone was designed and carved in Estonia under the guidance of the Samfundet för Estlandssvensk kultur (Society for Estonia-Swedish Culture), which was founded a couple of years earlier to represent the Estonia-Swedes who remained in Estonia after World War II.

One year before Estonia regained its independence, an anthology of Estonia-Swedish poems was published with the title *Speglar i minnenas hus* (Mirrors in the House of Memories) (SOV & SONG, 1990). The story behind this publication begins in the 1980s, when SOV formed a branch for young Estonia-Swedes born in Sweden without personal memories of Estonia. After a couple of years, the branch became a new association: Svenska Odlingens Nya Generation (Swedish Culture's New Generation) (Nyman and Salin, no

date). Through calls for Estonia-Swedish poetry in *Kustbon*, SONG collected nearly 2000 poems and lyrics (SONG & SOV, 1990, p. 4). For Ekman's lyrics, the edition meant a complete republishing of the version Stahl compiled and published in *Kustbon* in 1973. The lyrics are in dialect without translation into Swedish. This can be seen as a bit odd, since the primary target group did not grow up in Estonia, and most did not master Estonia-Swedish dialects.

In connection with the release, Elmar Nyman, who was born and raised in Estonia, explains who Ekman was for the younger generation of Estonia-Swedes in an article in *Kustbon* (Nyman, 1990, pp. 3–6). Nyman describes Ekman's songs as a canonized whole, 'the heritage of Mats Ekman.' In his article, Nyman presents what had only been transmitted orally: the melodies. Nyman mentions three melodies in the article that he remembers from childhood. He calls the melodies *modellmelodier* (model melodies) because Ekman used only a few melodies as rhythmic stencils when he wrote his lyrics, meaning the same melody was used for several different songs (Nyman, 1990, p. 5). The target group for the article is readers without their own memories of the village poet and his songs. This means that this article can be interpreted as a transition from memory production to cultural heritagage, as Nyman strives to clarify for the younger readers what the poems mean for older people from Rickul (Nyman, 1990, p. 6).

In the early 1990s, a completely new platform for cultural heritagage appeared in the form of *hembygdsföreningar* (local community associations). These organizations represented certain islands or areas where Estonia-Swedes lived. At this time, it was clear that Estonia-Swedish landowners needed associations based on regional representation and in communication with Estonian municipalities. On behalf of their members, the community associations applied to get land and farms back that had been confiscated and nationalized during the Soviet era. Rickul/Nuckö Hembygdsförening was formed in 1992 by persons with family ties to the former municipalities of Rickul and Nuckö, which then formed the Estonian municipality of Noarootsi.

The association's activities were conducted by committees. One of them dealt with cultural matters, including music. The first issue of the association's member magazine mentions that Lilian Pettersson and Inga Ekman had begun collecting and organizing everything having to do with Ekman's songs– a 'registration of lyrics and melodies' (Rickul/Nuckö Hembygdsförening, 1993, p. 6). Another active cultural heritagage, Ingegerd Lindström, a relative of Ekman through marriage, joined in the committee's work a little later, taking on the role of project manager and editor for the publication *Prästn e*

vargskall (2005) and the CD of Ekman's songs released in 2011. In the preface to *Prästn e vargskall*, Lindström relates how she heard about Ekman for the first time in 1986 when she sat by her mother-in-law's deathbed. Ekman was her mother-in-law's uncle, and her mother-in-law knew much about his songs, also mentioning his disability. Ekman was often teased by children, and she remembered this with sadness and regretted her words (Lindström, 2011, p. 8). For cultural heritaggers in the 1990s and 2000s, feelings of guilt are often an emotional motivation, combined with kinship to Ekman and personal memories of the songs. Feelings of guilt were also mentioned by Elmar Nyman, who wrote that now, with Ekman's memorial stone erected outside Roslep's chapel, people could let go of some of the guilt they felt (Nyman, 1990, p. 3). Lindström explains the twofold attitude towards Ekman by saying that he was probably seen as a bit tricky by his contemporaries because creative writing was not highly valued in peasant society (Lindström, 2019).

To reach out to younger generations of Estonia-Swedes, cultural heritaggers behind *Prästn e vargskall* added musical notation, illustrations, translations of the lyrics to standard Swedish, and a framing story about Ekman and the importance of his songs as cultural heritage. In 2011, a reprint of the book was made with a CD of fourteen songs and two poems added as an appendix. *Prästn e vargskall* is aimed at a target group without memories of life in Rickul during the interwar period, and the impact of the project is a new wave of singing the songs. Lindström writes in the preface that Ekman's poems are a cultural treasure and that 'it would be a shame if this vivid description of how life seemed among the Estonia-Swedes in the beginning of the twentieth century could only be read and understood by those who were born there and have memories from there' (Lindström, 2011, p. 10).

The cultural heritaggers behind *Prästn e vargskall* found 16 sets of lyrics and a poem by Ekman that had not been published before. One of the lyrics is dated to 1876 and could be one of Ekman's first songs. A couple of newly added songs have obvious sexual content and may therefore have previously been considered unsuitable for publication. Examples of such songs are '*Toke i bixana*' (The Fool in the Pants) and '*Dåbra Mare*'. The first is an internal dialogue between a man and his genitals and the second is, as already mentioned, a story about a woman who made a dildo and what happened when she put it on and went into the women's sauna. '*Toke i bixana*' has no preserved melody, but the song '*Dåbra Mare*' is included in the book with lyrics and melody and on the CD.

The objective for *Prästn e vargskall* was to include all the songs that can be regarded as Ekman's work. In cases where there were several versions of a song text, the editorial group had to agree on a version considered the best or most complete. The cultural heritaggers did not use concepts such as 'authentic,' 'genuine,' or 'pure.' Instead, close connections to Ekman and the completeness of the lyrics were highly valued by the cultural heritaggers. A close connection to Ekman means that lyrics were taken from the notebook that was assumed to belong to him. Versions of text that form a longer narrative whole, in the eyes of the cultural heritaggers, with a clear beginning and an end, are described as complete. Shorter, so-called incomplete texts were regarded as versions based on hearsay and deemed less important (Lindström, Brunberg, and Lindroos, 2019).

Beside lyrics, *Prästn e vargskall* (Lindström, 2011) also contains 14 melodies. The melodies of many of the songs had fallen out of the active collective memory without being collected. In the 1990s, however, some individuals could still remember a couple of melodies, and these were then written down. This means that Ekman's lyrics and melodies have been transmitted in different ways and at different times. The texts were first transmitted via oral tradition and handwritten songbooks, later via publications aimed at Swedish readers, and after the war via publicative cultural heritagging within the Estonia-Swedish community. All this while the melodies were maintained in an oral singing tradition. Over time, many of the melodies slipped from active cultural memory and fell into oblivion. In other words, the melodies in *Prästn e vargskall* were not selected by cultural heritaggers from official language or music archives, but were simply the melodies that older Estonia-Swedes still remembered and could transmit in the 1990s. A possible way of understanding what took place beyond the post-Soviet moment is that people active in community organizations decided to abandon earlier forms of remembering the community's life in Estonia through reading in favour of a newly initiated form of remembering: the re-enacting of songs as sonic expressions and revival as a tool for cultural heritagging.

When asked if there was any melody that singers on the CD had learned just before the recording, Lindström replied that they all recognized the melodies from before (Lindström, Brunberg, and Lindroos, 2019), which means that this was not an archive loop with the 2005 book affecting the recording in 2011. Rather, the collecting of melodies before the first print of the book meant that memory production gained momentum among cultural heritaggers, and the active cultural memory of cultural heritaggers changes during the

production and publication process. The working group included both persons with memories of how Ekman's songs were sung either in Estonia or later in exile, and persons who gained knowledge about the songs and their author through older relatives' stories based on memories. The recording from 2011 was the result of a joint memory production and an example of cultural heritag-ing through revival and re-enactment.

The active cultural memory arising in the cultural heritaggers differs from the prior knowledge they presume people in the target group have. This means that editions of this kind are compiled to fill the cultural memory or knowledge gaps that exist in the recipient. For people with few or no personal memories of the interwar period in Estonia, the publication does not stimulate memory production but instead transmits facts and knowledge about Swedish-speaking culture and life in Estonia in the decades around the year 1900.

One year after the first edition of *Prästn e vargskall* was released in 2005, an Ekman memorial fund was formed within the Rickul/Nuckö Hembygds-förening. The goal of the fund is to annually award scholarships to people who have worked toward the preservation of Estonia-Swedish culture (Lindström, 2021). The fact that the fund bears Ekman's name confirms how the community association strives to peg down Ekman's cultural heritage status in a context that is broader than their own local community association, but not extending beyond the Estonia-Swedish cultural sphere.

Conclusions

A characteristic feature of the cultural heritag-ing of Ekman's poems is that it was initiated and run by enthusiasts within Estonia-Swedes' cultural associations without the formal intervention or support of public cultural heritage institutions. This explains why Ekman's songs were collected, edited, preserved, and transmitted through publications as a set of projects and why the notebooks have not been deposited in any public cultural heritage archive or museum. The fact, however, that cultural heritage institutions did not participate in the process does not mean that public cultural heritage institutions would have been completely absent in the cultural heritag-ing of Ekman's poems. First, the team behind the publication in 1924 consisted of the Swedish linguist Gideon Danell, active at the dialect archive in Uppsala, and Jakob Blees, who was born and raised in Rickul. Blees was educated at Uppsala University

and later became an active member of the Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet (National Association for the Preservation of Swedishness Abroad). After the war, a third Ekman expert, Edvin Lagman, completed his education at Uppsala University and worked on Estonia-Swedish language research at the the dialect archive in Uppsala. One conclusion is that Blees, Danell, and Lagman, who belonged to the educated class and approached Ekman's production partly from a scientific perspective, were probably seen as representatives of public language and cultural heritage institutions by other Estonia-Swedes. This, in turn, may have helped other Estonia-Swedes trust their judgment, which in the case of Ekman's songs contributed to their increased value and new meaning as cultural heritage.

A basic idea for post-war publicative cultural heritagging among Estonia-Swedes in exile is that there are cultural memories from the community's former life in Estonia that are valuable not only for individuals and their families, but for the group as a whole. By considering the creation and dissemination of Ekman's songs as publicative cultural heritagging, it is possible to create a picture of how the songs went from a living song tradition to being part of a memory culture, to later being perceived as a unifying cultural heritage. More and more that was previously communicated orally within the group has been included in publications with songs because of natural generational change that, over time, has taken place within the Estonia-Swedish group, both among cultural heritaggers and their target groups. This is clearly noticeable in the latest edition of Ekman's songs, designed in a way that makes it possible to transmit what is seen as cultural heritage as a knowledge package to younger people with little or no cultural memories of the songs and their author.

One question concerning passive cultural memories is how one can become aware of their existence. Based on my analysis of Ekman's songs, most indicate that it is only when one starts to activate their cultural memories that others become aware of their own passive memories. How did this happen in practice? It happened through privately owned, handwritten song material and interpersonal contacts within the community and its associations. As the sources are mostly privately owned, these have been inherited as physical artifacts. Changes of ownership have brought material up to date, which, in combination with older relatives' memory stories, has functioned as a memory activator. This means that the 'heritage' part of the concept of cultural heritage does not only appear as a figurative but rather a literal aspect. Many cultural heritaggers are, in fact, cultural heirs. Furthermore, the fact that cultural

heritagers' ambitions are to transmit the song repertoire to a specific target group they have a close relationship with makes the people in the target group appear as carefully selected cultural heirs. Private ownership also reappears at a later stage, when the actual recipient has purchased a copy of the edition. This chapter states that Ekman's songs are not preserved as a complete collection in any cultural heritage or association archive, but as the editions are mediated through sales, the songs are preserved today privately in Estonia-Swedes' book collections, wherever they might be.

Theoretically, my analysis points to an intimate interplay between the mobilization of cultural groups, memory production, and cultural heritage processes. When it comes to memory production in the post-Soviet moment, it is clear that this was a process meant for internal use among different sub-groups of the Estonia-Swedish community – 'persons with roots in Rickul,' for example. Cultural heritage beyond the post-Soviet allows for a more informative packaging and can thereby be directed to a wider group – 'Estonia-Swedes.' I would not be surprised if Mats Ekman becomes, at some point, representative of 'West Estonian cultural heritage.'

There are two features pervading the cultural heritage in this case study: direct connections to what is perceived as a common former homeland and the fact that the song repertoire is never presented as a solely musical heritage. One example of how the musical element is toned down is how the songs are sometimes presented as 'poems' or 'sung poems' even though it is clear that it is about music, as the latest edition contains both musical notation and a CD. One assumption is that the focus on reaching as broad a target group as possible within the numerically limited community lies behind the idea of presenting the song repertoire as a multifaceted and interdisciplinary cultural heritage. This means that that all interested persons can find something to absorb, and a lack of prior musical or linguistic knowledge should not be an obstacle to approaching the songs.

Finally, even though the language, culture, and customs of Estonia-Swedes, a cultural minority in Estonia, differ from the titular culture of Estonia, this chapter suggests opportunities for comparing identity constructions among significantly different cultural groups on a theoretical level. When analyzing a specific cultural heritage process among Estonia-Swedes beyond the post-Soviet, commonalities emerge with memory production and cultural heritage processes of other Baltic cultural groups.

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CONVERSATION III

Latvian Music in Transition, 1980–2000

Sophia Kirsanova

Interviewed by Katherine Pukinskis

Q: A lot of your research focuses on what you call Latvian music ‘in transition,’ from the years 1980–2000. Can you speak a bit about what was happening in Latvia at that time?

The period from 1980 to 2000 was a time of significant political and economic changes in Latvia. As a result of Gorbachev’s reforms of 1985, the borders of the Soviet Union began to open, people gained more freedom of speech, and waves of social uprisings took place in the countries of the Soviet Union. In Latvia, the end of the 1980s is known as the Third National Awakening, or the Baltic Revolution. In 1991, following the final collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia regained its independence, which meant further changes. The government of Latvia was reformed, developed a new economic and cultural policy, and integrated with Western countries.

In studying this period, I selected from the generation of musicians who started their professional career in the Soviet time and continued during the post-Soviet transition. Among the musicians I interviewed were composers, violinists, and other musicians who were part of different orchestras and ensembles. In choosing these case studies, I focused on their experience of the transition period and how it affected and influenced their musical career. My research explored, through interviews and secondary sources, how these events affected classical musicians – violinists in particular – as well as the performed repertoire. In parallel, I studied the music written during this period by Latvian composers, and I also commissioned new works as part of this project.

Q: The composers you speak about in your work were all living and working during this time. Is there a sound or aesthetic you can identify across each of these composers? What makes these pieces sound like they are ‘in transition’?

Each composer and musician had a different experience of the post-Soviet transition, which had an individual impact on their own creative work. The general directions in Latvia since the collapse of the Soviet Union are the broadening of possibilities outside the borders of the Soviet Union and integrating with Western culture. As Latvia became independent again, the representation of Latvian identity in culture also became more relevant. Nevertheless, this shift has had a diverse manifestation among composers. Latvian identity or ‘Latvianity’ in music can be expressed in different ways, such as through reference to nature or folk music, or the influence of the Latvian national romantic school. In my research, I have looked for different forms of this expression in connection with musical works. While Latvianity is a subjective perception, it raises a broader question about what defines Latvian identity, how it has been defined by others, and how it became redefined during this period of change.

Similar to variations on Latvianity, the Western influence also has a broad conveyance. Musicologist Ilze Šarkovska-Liepiņa in the book *Latviešu Mūzikas Kods* (Latvian Music Code) writes about the general trends in Latvian classical music and describes the Western influence on Latvian composers as an ‘explosion’ of various Western compositional styles after separation from the Soviet Union. ‘A new political environment has allowed them to secure post-modernism aesthetics and expressions as well as the Western avant-garde, which so far has not been completely experienced in Latvia,’ writes Šarkovska-Liepiņa (2014, p. 49), and that ‘after the long occupation, creative freedom was established in Latvia and Western culture trends entered it without obstruction....’

The violin repertoire I explored for this project was varied and included different styles. Interestingly, I found a limited repertoire to choose from in my study period. Moreover, the scarcity of available scores and recordings made the list even smaller. Therefore, I also included music composed in the late-Soviet period, in the first years of the independent state, Latvian diaspora composers, new commissions, and music from the start of the twentieth century.

One of my focuses was on the violin sonata genre, which, for example, became very rare after 1990. I found more examples of this genre in the late-Soviet period. I built a collection of numerous sonatas by Latvian composers

written throughout the 1970s and 1980s, from which I selected a few for further study; as part of this project, I performed sonatas by composers Imants Zemzaris, Juris Ābols, and Juris Karlsons.

Another focus in my repertoire was Latvian violin music of the first part of the twentieth century. When Latvia restored its independent state in 1991, Latvia looked back to its historical past. In music, this time is significant for the development of Latvian classical music traditions and national romanticism, and these composers experienced more visibility and engagement in the 1990s. One such composer is Jānis Mediņš (1890–1966), who was the founder of several Latvian classical music genres, including the first ballet (along with Alfrēds Kalniņš), opera, the piano concerto, piano trio, and symphonic poem (Godunova, 2007). For my performance, I chose to perform Mediņš' *Piano Trio no.1* (1930) and the miniature 'Splinter' for violin and piano (1924). The trio is significant as it is the first in this genre in Latvia, while 'Splinter' represents a common type of work from this period. It, however, stands out from other, similar pieces by different composers with its virtuosity and humorous mood, rather than a lyrical character more for the genre.

Q: You cite Toccata, op. 40, for solo violin by Aivars Kalējs as an important piece and sound of this time. Could you talk a bit about the life of the piece in these transition years, and how its sound reflects that historical moment?

Aivars Kalējs (b. 1951) is a well-known organist and composer in Latvia. He composed *Toccata* in 1985 and it was performed often by the legendary Latvian violinist and long-time Latvian Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Valdis Zariņš. The performance history of this work reflects this time period as Zariņš often performed it on tours in Sweden (Haradžanjan, 1992), and Canada (Štrāle-Didrichsone, 1996), when, during *perestroika* in the late 1980s, musicians could travel more freely outside the borders of the USSR.

In addition, *Toccata's* genre affiliation to the Baroque era and spiritual character also reflects another feature of this time. It can be seen as opposition to the Soviet repression of religious practice and the revival of sacred music in the Baltics. Religious freedom along with national identity was one of the human rights support streams in the Baltic states. As Andres Kasekamp (2010, p. 139) writes, 'In Lithuania, where the struggle to defend the right to practice religion was strongest, this was clearly connected with aspirations of national freedom.' In that way, *Toccata* existed and represented these values in Latvia.

In addition, as a violinist, I also appreciate the compositional mastery of this work, which extensively showcases the possibilities of the instrument in

both technical and musical expression. It is a rare example of a substantial solo work in the Latvian violin repertoire.

Q: The 1990s experienced a lot of organizational and political restructuring. How did this affect the arts and performing ensembles in Latvia?

In classical music, the post-Soviet Latvian government didn't implement significant structural changes until 1997. It was mainly in the hands of each individual ensemble's management and musicians themselves to adapt to the complications of the transition years. The All-Soviet cultural funds that had previously supported artists and organizations were lost with the collapse of the USSR, and the Latvian government could not compensate for it entirely. Latvia's economy was still unstable, and people struggled financially. Due to insufficient income, additional earnings became essential for musicians. Many started to look to organize concerts abroad, which was now possible and profitable due to higher performance fees in the West. The tours were often organized individually, through personal contacts accumulated during the Soviet times or diaspora Latvians. Many musicians recollect long, challenging tours throughout the 1990's. 'The tours were in terribly heavy conditions,' remembered the former orchestra manager of the Latvian Symphony Orchestra. 'We travelled from Rīga to Spain by bus (approximately 3,000 km) without stopping overnight' (Galenieks, 2021). The agencies hiring musicians also often wanted to save money by hiring the orchestra for the cheapest fee possible; however, for Latvians the payment received abroad still meant big wealth in Latvia. Yuri Savkin, the violinist of the Rīga String Quartet (RSQ) and a freelance musician in the 1990s, said in an interview that he would receive on average a fee of 60 Lats (LVL) for a concert in Latvia. For a project arranged by a Swedish agency, however, he would receive the equivalent of 180 LVL, paid out in German Marks. As part of that project, in addition to 15 contracted concerts in Sweden, he also recorded an album with the RSQ and received 10 Lats for his daily allowance. 'It was a fabulous opportunity!' Yuri remembers. On a tour to Luxembourg with the LP Chamber orchestra, he would earn 200 Lats in a week. 'That was two times more than the highest monthly salary in Latvia at the time,' Yuri explains (Savkin, 2021).

In 1997, the Latvian government restructured the centre of Latvian classical music – the Philharmonic. This change was a major event in Latvian classical music. From the existing Philharmonic satellite ensembles, it formed three public non-profit organizations or limited liability corporations: the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, the State Academic Choir 'Latvia,'

and the Latvian Concert-Directorate. The other three collectives, however, the Latvian Philharmonic [LP] Piano Trio, the LP Chamber Orchestra, and the LP Dance Ensemble ‘Daile,’ were to become independent without government support. This restructuring and the folding of the three ensembles received a negative response. The LP Trio and the chamber orchestra contributed significantly to the performance of Latvian composers and therefore received criticism in the media. Composer Andris Dzenītis opposed this decision and questioned its objectivity in his article titled ‘Obituary to Living Musicians’ (Dzenītis, 1997). Also, in another article written by Ilze Zveja, she denounced the decision (Zveja, 1997), polemically arguing that Latvian music had paradoxically more support during the Soviet times. It was also suggested that the reason for not including the chamber orchestra as part of the government-supported collectives was the need for a more modern concept, as the orchestra was formed during the Soviet period. Similar parallels were made with the dance ensemble Daile.

To compensate in some ways for the closure of the LP groups at the end of 1997, the Ministry of Culture started a chamber music grant competition. It created an opportunity for those now independent musicians, as well as others, to form new ensembles and realize their artistic ideas and programs. The goal of the new classical music management system was to create more variety. It also, however, increased the competition. For many it became a matter of adaptation, acquiring new management skills and hardship to sustain an ensemble on the basis of projects. The former LP Piano Trio violinist Jānis Bulavs applied for the chamber music program competition many times, though his projects often weren’t supported (Pētersone, 2018, p. 134). Similar to the LP trio, violinist Juris Švolkovskis – former LP soloist and LP trio member in its previous formation, also experienced challenges with the new system. Švolkovskis wasn’t interested in competing for the chamber music project selection. He compared the new method to the Soviet system when musicians wouldn’t be free in their creativity and a committee would decide on someone’s ideas or projects (Švolkovskis, 2020).

Q: Pēteris Vasks is such an important part of Latvia’s musical footprint, having lived through occupation, the transition, and now the period after the transition. Could you talk about how his work, and in particular the piece ‘Little Summer Music’, characterizes his own artistic voice and also how Vasks represents or engages with Latvia and sounding Latvian?

Vasks is indeed one of the most notable Latvian composers of today, as well as in the period I studied. In the late 1980s, Vasks was one of the rare Latvian composers performed, commissioned, and published in the West (Aperāne, 1990, p. 167). Although he was already gaining recognition during the late Soviet period, his popularity rose particularly after Latvia's independence, bolstered by a publishing contract with Schott Music International (Kudiņš, 2020).

Besides being one of the most internationally recognized Latvian composers, Vasks is also an influential and notable figure in Latvian culture. In the 1990s Vasks was actively involved in promoting Latvian classical music. He was on the chamber music program committee formed by the Latvian Ministry of Culture to organize concerts after the 1997 Latvian Philharmonic reconstructions (Zvaigzne, 1998). He was also on the Composers' Union board of directors (Šarkovska-Liepiņa, 1990, p. 171). In 2011, Vasks, together with sculptor Regīna Deicmane and flutist Dita Kreinberga, established the Vasks Music Fund, which invests in young Latvian composers and performances of All-Latvian program concerts at the Mežotnes Palace. One of the works I performed in this context was 'Angel's Sight' for violin and piano (2016), commissioned by the Pēteris Vasks Foundation and composed by Vasks' former student and one of the leading younger generation composers in Latvia, Platon Buravicky.

In addition, Vasks is also one of the most notable composers for string instruments and I have included many of his works in my performances. Among those are the duo for violin and cello 'Castillo Interior', 'Little Summer Music' for violin and piano, and *Concerto Nr. 1* for Violin and String Orchestra called 'Distant Light' (*Tala gaisma*).

Vasks is also recognized by his individual style or voice in music. Latvianity has been often linked to Vasks's music by the composer himself and also by musicologists. In a section of *Latvian Music Code*, which was dedicated to Vasks, Ilze Šarkovska-Liepiņa highlights his affiliation with Latvianity as a conscious choice of direction in his musical artistry. She distinguishes two main elements in his musical identity, belonging to his nation and to his Christian faith. Šarkovska finds parallels between Vasks' Latvianity, or 'talking in music with the mother tongue,' and the work of other Latvian composers. In Vasks' music, Šarkovska connects an expression of Latvianity to the influence of Latvian national romanticism of the twentieth century. She finds the use of genres, folk music intonations, rhythmical patterns, and character

contrasts in Vasks' music to parallel Latvian composers who worked in the neo-romantic style (Šarkovska-Liepina, 2014, pp. 87–97).

Vasks himself has acknowledged a conscious choice to express Latvianity in his music. In an interview in 1991, he discussed presenting a new image of Latvian classical music in Western countries after returning from a successful tour abroad (Vasks, 1991). He expressed the idea that Latvian classical music must have its own identity, one that is separate and different from that of the Soviet Union, and that represents Latvian music in the new light of the independent country. In the same interview he also talks about the importance of Latvian language, a connection to nature, and the history of the Latvian nation. He also believes that Latvianity made music distinctive and, in a way, more attractive to audiences abroad. Similar to Vasks, Šarkovska-Liepina believes (2014, pp. 87–97) that Latvianity is what brings originality to Latvian music. A distinctive Latvianity, which is separate from Latvian music composed during the Soviet period, makes the nation's classical music stand out and succeed on the world stage today. 'I represent Latvian music,' says Vasks in an interview with Ināra Jakubone. 'I've been always interested in how to speak in my music in Latvian. What is national identity in music?' (Vasks, 1991a, p. 5). This intention is also described by him in another interview (Vasks, 1991b, p. 1) explaining his creative process and aims: 'To talk Latvian in music, in my mother tongue. Only in that way can I express myself, saying something perhaps unknown to others. Tiny, so much suffered, so many times conquered and sold out, but stubbornly standing on its rights to exist – a nation saying "Yes. This is how I see my music".'

Little Summer Music (1985) by Vasks resonates with the idea of expressing Latvianity in musical language by imitating Latvian folk music. The annotation of the work on the publisher's website (Vasks, 1985, p. 3) explains: 'The six-movement suite tells the sorrowful history of the Latvian people whose soul and love of nature are captured by the melancholy and folk-like character of the music.'

Q: Who were some other important performers and composers during this time?

In my focus on the violin repertoire of this period I also explored works by Maija Einfelde (1939) and Indra Riše (1961). Einfelde started her career in the Soviet period and gained broader recognition after winning first prize at the Barlow Endowment for Music Competition in 1997. Her contribution to the violin repertoire is also important with her chamber music collection. She has written two piano trios with violin, three sonatas for violin and piano, sonata

for violin and organ, and a sonata for violin solo. I have performed her second piano trio (2017) and the trio ‘Before Sunrise’, originally for viola, clarinet, and piano, which I arranged for violin, saxophone, and piano.

Other works I chose to perform have been by composer Indra Riše, who left Latvia in 1993. Riše, similar to others, sought opportunities abroad during the 1990s, and won a scholarship from the Danish Ministry of Culture to study composition in Copenhagen. In 2002 she returned to Latvia, where she continues to live and work today. The inspiration for her work ‘Landscape in Fog’ for violin and piano (1994), as the composer writes, comes from nature, and depicts natural phenomena, colours, and moods. The piano trio *The Bird Oratorio* (2017) also explores the theme of nature as well as the subject of homeland. ‘It is a tribute to people who have gone abroad to seek happiness,’ the composer writes in a program note (Riše, 2017, p. 2). ‘Unfortunately, nature is not just about birdsong, peace, beauty, and balance. Nature is also harsh – it teaches belonging, selfless care, and love for the place where we were born. Nature teaches us struggle for survival and the struggle for your homeland.’

Q: Looking forward, what is happening after the ‘in transition’ years, into the present day and beyond? In what ways is the music you know extending from the years 1980–2000, or how is it departing from this time?

The post-Soviet transition period was an important turning point in Latvia’s history and its influence is still felt today. The struggles that violinists faced during the transition – financial instability, insufficient state funding, musicians leaving to study or work abroad, competition with other music genres in Latvia – all had and continue to have an impact. These circumstances are still relevant today and are rooted in the reconstruction of the transition years.

Latvia has been independent for a remarkably short time after being under foreign rulers for most of its history. Latvia’s independence is still stabilizing even today. Similar to the transitional period, Western influence remains an important factor with Latvia relying on the support of the major European countries. Since 1991, new structures and initiatives in music are also continuing to evolve. The classical management system in Latvia today is similar to the one created by the Latvian Ministry of Culture in 1997, however, it has had changes over time. Many initiatives formed during the transition years are still a big part of today’s Latvian music. One of the most successful initiatives during those years has been the Kremerata Baltica chamber orchestra, founded by violinist Gidon Kremer and formed of musicians from the Baltic states.

It has gained a great reputation both in Latvia and abroad, receiving Grammy awards (2002, 2020) and continuing to actively perform and record. Among other successful long-term initiatives has been another chamber orchestra formed in 1987 by the oboist and conductor Normund Šnē (Daškevica, 1999). The orchestra was officially renamed Sinfonietta Rīga in 2006, and it continues to be one of the leading orchestras in Latvia today (Saulīte, 2006). Notable developments in recent years include new concert halls in the cities of Cēsis, Liepāja, and Rēzekne. These new venues have remarkably enhanced musical outreach in the regions. Skani, a classical music record label under the management of the Latvian Music Centre established in recent years, is also a positive development as the major publisher of Latvian classical music records.

Soviet traditions are still preserved at some level in Latvia, too. The skills, knowledge, and connections acquired in the Soviet period have been beneficial to musicians and helped the continuity of music in Latvia after reconstruction. Many musicians I interviewed have noted the quality of Soviet music education and its long-lasting benefits to Latvian music. Composer, conductor, and educator Andris Vecumnieks said to me in an interview (Vecumnieks, 2020), ‘I want to dispel the prejudice or beliefs that the Soviet education system was bad or useless, “dry,” and paralysing to artistic freedom.’ He continues, ‘Yes, it was so to some extent. However, that cannot be said about the professional music education. Essentially most of the well-known educators of the 1990s, which were in fact Soviet system educated themselves, still continue working today and are employed by the world’s leading music schools.’ Vecumnieks went on to describe how, ‘Thirty years have passed, and the quality of this education system has remained with us in Latvia and in the territory of the former Soviet Union. This shows the merit of the Soviet Union education system. And let’s face it, all those Russian school artists who performed concerts from the 1970s through the 1990s continue to be in high demand.’

As my research explored the violinist’s profession and repertoire, there remain many more aspects of this period for further study. In Latvia, the research focus has been on the Baltic Revolution and the first period of independence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among the interviewees I also encountered reluctance towards the transition period as many found it difficult and full of struggles. Similar to the historical narrative, people prefer to focus on the most positive aspects of this time, such as the uplift of the Baltic Revolution, the opening of borders to the West, and the appreciation of those Latvian musicians who achieved international success. The transition years 1980–2000 is a starting point of a new period in any field as well as in

classical music and bears a deep connection to the present day; it deserves our continued attention.

Q: Latvians aren't only making music in Latvia; what music is being made in Latvian diasporas?

Being part of the Latvian community in Melbourne, Australia gave me the opportunity to learn more about Latvian culture in the diaspora. In Melbourne, the community choir is an important part of Latvian society. The choir often performs at community events and participates at the Song Festival in Latvia. Professional conductors from Latvia often come to Australia to give masterclasses and conduct workshops within the community. Latvian choirs and ensembles often tour Australia as well. In addition to many events, workshops, and activities often organized within the Australian-Latvian community, a yearly festival called Latvian Cultural Days is held which includes various music and culture events.

The collaboration between Latvia and Latvian diaspora communities has intensified since 1991 and remains very strong. In my performance practice as part of my research, I wanted to explore this connection in music too by including Latvian diasporic composers. Among many diaspora composers, I chose two local Australian-Latvians: Ella Macens and Sandra Aleksejeva-Birze. Both composers are active in their local Latvian community, and their Latvian heritage is an important part of their artistic expression. Macens's connection to Latvia can be seen in the use of Latvian poetry in her choral works and inspiration from other Latvian composers. Her music is dominated by diatonic harmony and a subtle, transparent canvas of sound, which resonates with the new simplicity style emblematic of the works of Pēteris Vasks. I performed Macens's 'The Sleep Sonata' for violin and piano, which attracted me with its aesthetics of simplicity and sincerity. The melodic or vocal approach of the violin part compliments the instrument making it sound with ease and much resonance.

Sandra Aleksejeva-Birze's composition, 'Variations on Latvian Folk Song: *Div' Dūjiņas gaisa skrēja* (Two doves flew up in the sky)' for solo violin, directly reflects Birze's deeply felt connections to Latvian roots. Besides being a composer and piano teacher, Birze is at the center of Latvian community in Melbourne. She is the artistic leader and conductor of the Melbourne community choirs Daina and Vesperis. Her '*Div' Dūjiņas*' variations for solo violin was written for me in 2021 to perform at the concert dedicated to the commemorations of the 14 June 1940 deportations in Latvia.

Q: You have also commissioned new works from Latvian composers as part of your research and practice. Who are the composers and what are the pieces?

The two commissioned works as part of my research project are by Ēriks Ešenvalds (1977) and Linda Leimane (1989). The two composers represent the younger generation of Latvian composers. Although the two pieces are both very different stylistically, the violin is central in both. With these works I wanted to promote Latvian violin music of today and showcase its variety.

Linda Leimane is a recognized member of the youngest generation of composers in Latvia. She writes for various classical form ensembles, collaborates with different disciplines, as well as performing electronics. Linda attracted me with her ability to create an atmosphere through original sound textures. I was impressed by her talent and approached her to write a work for violin. The new commission, *The Architectonics of a Crystal Soul*, for violin solo and an ensemble was created with the support of the Latvian Cultural Capital Fund. As Leimane describes (Leimane, 2020), ‘It is a fifteen-minute-long large-scale constellation, focusing on the violin and creating synergy between the solo and the ensemble of flute, clarinet, violoncello, and piano. The musical idea is to create a sonic environment of an imaginary city, where artefacts of different ages and cultures meet. The soundscape is experienced and perceived by a “crystal soul” or the solo violin – alive, feeling, pulsating, breathing, fragile and strong, present in different ages and parts of the planet.’ This work was premiered at the New Music Studio concert series at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (the University of Melbourne) together with the Melbourne-based contemporary players Syzygy Ensemble.

‘The Morning Mist’ by Ēriks Ešenvalds was commissioned with the support of Melbourne-Latvian community members Anita and Graham Anderson as a contribution to my research. In the prosperous genre of choral music in Latvia, Ešenvalds is one of the most celebrated composers with international recognition. He is an established composer in Latvia and is currently the head of composition at the Latvian Academy of Music. I have been familiar with his music mostly by participation in different choirs and have always been deeply touched by his music. I wished to perform his music on violin as well. He has previously written expanded solos for violin in his larger orchestral and choir works and features violin in his chamber music too. *The Morning Mist*, however, is his first major work for violin and together with pianist Georgina Lewis we gave its premiere performance at the Melbourne Recital Centre in August 2022.

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Afterword: After *What?*

Kevin C. Karnes

The conference from which this volume arose took place in what now seems a different age. In hindsight, the evidence was clear: over 100,000 Russian troops gathering on Ukraine's borders, statements from Moscow increasingly unhinged. Still, the invasion of 24 February 2022 came as a shock. I had spent two decades studying Latvian culture and history – and, as all students of Latvia must, also Russian culture and history. But the reality of this war was just not quite fathomable. It was a massive failure of imagination, a failure to see things as they were.

In my own contribution to the conference, I meditated on statements by the Russian art theorist and philosopher Keti Chukhrov, published in a Polish conference report of 2013 dedicated to artistic culture in Russian spaces of the 'post-post-Soviet,' and also in an essay that appeared in the Moscow-based *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* (Art Magazine), six years earlier. In that pair of essays, she described the work of a new generation of Russian artists as marking a turning point in Russian and broader east-European history, having been created by individuals 'who have come of age without direct memories of the socialist past' (Chukhrov, 2013, p. 252). A new complex of experiences and perspectives, she suggested, had enabled her colleagues to look beyond the political divides of Soviet and post-Soviet conditions alike, and to mine the experience of Russia's twentieth-century history for ideas that might enable them to build collectively a better future. 'The question of whether or not contemporary Russian social space happens to be beyond [the] post-Soviet experience,' she wrote, 'is dependent on whether or not the Soviet experience is regarded as an obsolete authoritarian past, or as [an] alternative modernity

which, notwithstanding all its failings, contained valuable elements for building... a post-class, if not classless, society' (Chukhrov, 2013, p. 253). In our attempts to fathom Soviet art and ideology in a post-Soviet age, she stressed, 'we [should] regard communism not as a state project that succeeded or failed... but rather as... an ethical litmus test of the ability to think in a certain ethical direction: namely, of one's inability to consider one's human purpose realized if one does not care for others' (Chukhrov 2007).¹

Chukhrov's words about Soviet art and society are certainly in concert with how some in the Soviet Baltic republics saw things for themselves. Take, for instance, the Latvian poet, musician, video artist, and curator Juris Boiko (1954–2002). When interviewed by a West German critic on the eve of the 1988 opening of the Riga: Lettische Avantgarde (Rīga: Latvian Avantgarde) exhibition staged by the Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (New Society for Fine Arts) in West Berlin, Boiko asked rhetorically, 'What, then, is socialism?' His answer: 'It is social life. It is active contacts between individuals' (as quoted in Gillen, 1988, p. 47). Here, it might seem, was historical testament to Chukhrov's claim for the 'care for others' that Soviet socialism ostensibly instilled in many who lived under it. Alexei Yurchak has documented many such statements in his anthropological work among members of what he calls the 'last Soviet generation.' As he summarizes succinctly, 'The positive, creative, ethical side of life was just as organic a part of socialist reality as feelings of alienation and meaninglessness' (Yurchak 2014, p. 45).²

Boiko's words were deeply felt, and Yurchak's conclusion is undeniable with respect to the historical subjects he considers. But what I did not see quite so clearly at the time of the conference is the fact that there is a world of difference – actually, an unbridgeable gulf – between such statements made under Soviet rule and Chukhrov's from decades after its end. This gulf derives not, or not only, from the time that separated one observer from the other, but from the positions from which they wrote and spoke. Boiko was a Latvian showing his work abroad in 1988, describing to an audience in the Cold War West the essence and promise of his nation in terms of the structures of thought by which he had come to understand them. Chukhrov, in contrast, identified herself, long after the Cold War had ended, with the very

¹ For an English translation of Chukhrov 2007 that differs from my own translation given here, see Chukhrov (2017, p. 198).

² This summary statement was newly added to the Russian edition of his highly influential monograph, published in 2014. It does not appear in the original, English edition of the study (cf. Yurchak, 2006).

nation that had imposed the interpretive lens of Soviet socialism upon Baltic peoples in the first place. And when she wrote, she resided within – in fact, she *represented* at the Polish conference – a country whose citizens had collectively declined, already for two decades, to confront its very recent history of colonization and terror.

The 2013 volume to which Chukhrov contributed shipped with a little pullout poster by the graphic artist Anton Nikolaev. Against a plain white background, a stark block text: ‘мы не знаем чего хотим’ (we don’t know what we want). I do not know the intention behind its inclusion. But at the time the book’s essays were being written, shortly before the end of Russian protests about Putin’s return to the presidency, I imagine the poster might have been read as ironic, a Cage-like *now that we are free to do anything, we don’t know where to start*. Or perhaps it could have been read as self-critical: *Do we want to engage with the broader world, or focus our efforts only within Russia? Or maybe: Do we want to participate in social, even political conversations, or do we want to just focus on making art? Or even, perhaps: Events in our country are troubling. How should we respond?* As we understand clearly today, however, to ponder any of these things in a Russian or even a Russian émigré context cannot strike a person outside of that context as anything but exculpatory, indifferent, deluded, even laughable. It simply does not matter – in fact, *it did not matter back in 2013* – what any artist, or just about anyone else, might want from or within post-Soviet Russia, arguably since 1993, certainly not since February 2022, and probably not since any number of points in between that marked the gradual yet unchecked evaporation of critical discourse and civil society in that country.³ What a person wants has absolutely no bearing upon what state or society will deliver. To pretend otherwise is to court scorn and pity, in the collective West and in Russia as well.

That response is registered especially in Ukraine, and also in Poland and the Baltic states. Here, in these places, it really does matter what people,

³ Following the shelling on the Russian White House and Yeltsin’s dissolving of the parliament in 1993, these would include the First Chechan War of 1994–96, the apartment bombings and start of the Second Chechan War in 1999, Putin’s elevation to the presidency in 2000, the Beslan massacre of 2004, the invasion and partial occupation of Georgia in 2008, Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, suppression and dissolution of Moscow protests in 2013, the codification into law of sweeping anti-LGBTQ+ repressions that same year, the first invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Crimea in 2014, and, of course, Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine, launched in February 2022.

artists and scholars among them, want of and for their lives and communities. Among those things so many people want – what just about *everyone* in these places wants – is to contribute meaningfully to, and to be recognized within, communities of their own choosing. They want to examine and define themselves, to themselves and to others, in relation to the histories, stories, and aspirations they take as their own. And they want to do these things before and in conversation with the broader world – a world that they themselves will help to define. Among countless arenas, this has been made abundantly clear in artistic initiatives regularly undertaken in collaboration with colleagues across Europe. In these projects, the contrast with the Russian *we don't know what we want* could not be starker: 'Who If Not We Should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This' (Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, among other European locales: Hlavajova and Winder, 2004), 'Parallel Chronologies' and 'Recuperating the Invisible Past' (Rīgas mākslas telpa and Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art: Astahovska 2012), 'Notes from the Underground' (Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź: Crowley and Muzyczuk, 2016), 'Archeologists of Memory' (Eesti Kunstimuuseum: Tuulberg, 2022), to name just some.

But what artists and others in the Baltic states want more than anything else is *not to go back* to subjugation and terror, at any cost, ever. Not to go back to anything even remotely resembling, even remotely reminiscent of the colonized life of the Soviet world or its grotesque simulacrum in modern Russia. What they want is to move ahead, to move *beyond*: definitively, irreversibly, from now until forever. The horror of Russia's war in Ukraine has demolished Chukhrov's contention that a new generation of artists has come of age without any real consciousness of the Soviet experience. As Živilė Arnašūtė observes in her contribution to the present volume, 'as Lithuanians witness Russia's invasion of Ukraine, traumas of the past are reactivated. Independence generations [i.e., those born approximately 1975–95] are starting to resonate with the fears and experiences of their families' (p. 46). But the newly traumatized are also emboldened to forcefully assert their power and right to define and interpret their lives and histories, to those within their communities of choosing, and to those outside of them as well.

Perhaps nothing attests more powerfully to this than the destruction of an artwork six months after the invasion began. On 25 August 2022, "Riga's monument to the Soviet victory in World War II was brought to the ground. An obelisk seventy-nine meters tall, it was the largest such monument in the Baltic states and one of the tallest structures in the city. The decision by republic and city authorities to demolish it had been made in May, and it was

greeted by isolated but sometimes sizeable protests. When I visited that month, the atmosphere was tense, with substantial police presence around the site and in the square in front of city hall. But three months later, when it finally came down, there was... nothing. No significant protest took place in Rīga or anywhere else (Anon. 2022a, Anon. 2022b). The moment of demolition passed in a way as if to signal that the mode of living commemorated by the monument had also truly, finally passed. It was as if a chapter had simply ended, a page had simply been turned. In the post-Soviet age, the obelisk had insistently memorialized the Soviet. Now it is gone. The ground is being repaired. This chapter of the post-Soviet is over.

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