



History, facts and figures of the Estonian Song Celebration

What is the story of song and dance celebrations still uniting new generations? Here you will find milestones and tidbits of the path of our song and dance celebration.

1869 – the first Estonian Song Celebration was held in Tartu with 878 male singers and brass players. Publisher Johann Voldemar Jannsen initiated the Song Celebration as part of the Estonian national awakening movement. Simple peasants discovered that their traditions can be part of high culture. His daughter, Lydia Koidula was the author of lyrics for two Estonian songs “Sind surmani” and “Mu isamaa on minu arm” that are still in the Song Celebration repertoire today. She was also involved with the preparations of the scores and fund raising – quite an unusual role for a woman at that time. All songs were in Estonian.

1880 – the Song Celebration was held in Tallinn for the first time. A year later Finland arranged the first nation-wide song and music celebration.

1891 – in Tartu mixed choirs participated for the first time. In spite of Russian Tsar’s efforts to force the domination of Russian language in public life more than half of the songs were in Estonian, among them songs by Miina Härma, the first female composer. Singers spontaneously tuned into today’s Estonian anthem “Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm” by Fredrik Pacius. In the years to come choir singing remained the only cultural activity in Estonian as the Russian emperor required all official matters and education to be handled in Russian.

1894 – for the first time choirs from Estonian settlements in Russia participated at the celebration in Tartu. Pacius’ anthem was sung again.

1910 – the Celebration was held in Tallinn with children’s choirs among the performers for the first time. Mihkel Lüdigi, whose “Koit” (Dawn) is the standard opener today, was the artistic director of a celebration with a complicated repertoire.

1923 – the first Celebration in independent Estonia on a permanent stage in Tallinn, that could fit 12 000 singers. The first aerial photograph and the first film of the celebration were shot.

1928 – the first Celebration on today’s Song Festival Grounds in Tallinn – the new stage by architect Karl Burman fitted 15 000 singers.

1933 – Female choirs participated for the first time, the first radio broadcast from the celebration.

1938 – Gustav Ernesaks conducted at the Song Celebration for the first time, his music was performed. In 1944 he wrote the music to “Mu isamaa on minu arm” to the lyrics of Lydia Koidula while deported to Russia. Five days later Soviet army bombed Tallinn and destroyed “Estonia” opera house, national broadcasting and conservatory among many other buildings. In 1944 more than 70 000 Estonians fled the country to the West, among them many well-known musicians. In 1946 first larger Estonian Song Celebrations were held in Germany, later in Sweden, USA, Canada, Australia, UK.

1947 – Gustav Ernesaks was one of the artistic directors. In spite of massive Soviet propaganda the repertoire was still mostly traditional. People were being arrested even at the Song Festival Grounds. Ernesaks’ “Mu isamaa on minu arm” to lyrics of Koidula was performed for the first time. In 1950 another wave of Soviet repressions included Song Celebration artistic directors Alfred Karindi, Riho Päts and Tuudur Vetik.

1950 - the darkest chapter in the Song Celebration history. Soviet propaganda songs dominated the repertoire; choirs of Soviet miners and army were among the participants. During the dark era of Soviet oppression choir singing remained one of the few areas where private initiative and trust were still present. It helped to keep the longing for freedom alive. In spite of the schizophrenic situation most Estonians held the Song Celebration dear as the most important national event.

1960 – the new Song Festival Stage by architect Alar Kotli was built. Before the concert “Mu isamaa on minu arm” was removed from the programme, however choirs started to sing it spontaneously and after a moment’s hesitation Ernesaks climbed up to the conductor’s stand and started to conduct. Since then the song is the most anticipated and “compulsory” finale of the celebration.

1969 - celebrated the first centennial of the song celebrations with the flame being lit for the first time in Tartu, the birthplace of the celebrations and carried through Estonia to Tallinn. The repertoire was a lot more traditional compared to the Soviet propaganda filled celebrations before and after. “Koit” (Dawn) by Mihkel Lüdigi became the traditional opening song.

In 1972 exile Estonians organized the first ESTO with a worldwide Estonian Song celebration at its focus in Toronto, Canada. Estonian dissidents sent a letter to the United Nations demanding the restoration of independence. In the end of 1970s Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, many Estonians were drafted.

1980 - celebration was part of the cultural programme of the Moscow Olympic games that was boycotted by most of the free world. The soviet powers increased pressure on dissidents, well-known Estonian musicians Arvo Pärt and Neeme Järvi emigrated to the West.

In 1988 Alo Mattiisen’s “Five Patriotic Songs” were performed at Tartu Pop Music Days in May; in June the singing revolution started at Tallinn Song Festival grounds. Thousands of people flocked to the spontaneous singing gatherings night after night, in the end there were many hundred thousand people. In August 1989 two million people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined hands in 600 km long human chain to protest the soviet occupation of their countries.

1990 - the Song Celebration although formally still in the Soviet Union was carried by traditional symbols and repertoire. The concert finished with “Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm” – the former and current Estonian anthem that was banned by the soviets. Estonia’s independence was restored a year later on 20th August 1991.

1994 - the first celebration after the restoration of independence.

1999 - young children’s choirs participated for the first time. President Lennart Meri was quoted as saying “Song celebration is not a matter of fashion. Song celebration is a matter of the heart.” – even though Estonia was independent now and the cultural identity was not threatened by foreign powers people still considered the song celebration a matter of pride and joy that needed to live on.

In 2003 Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Song and Dance Celebrations were listed as UNESCO oral and intangible heritage. In 2004 Estonia joined the EU and NATO.

2004 – the statue of Gustav Ernesaks was opened at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds. Due to heavy rain the official procession was cancelled but singers and dancers still spontaneously joined the march.

2009 – “To breathe as one” - from now on next to music also a message of values was set in focus, this time it was the connection between generations. “Breathing as one” became a new idiom in Estonian language. Singers started a wave of raising hands travelling from the top of the stage to the end of the audience rows resulting in an ecstatic melting together of the performers and audience. “[To Breathe as One](#)” is also the title of the film by Jim Tusty that was released in the USA this year.

2014 – “Touched by Time. The Time to Touch.” A record breaking number of participants - 42 000 singers, dancers and musicians filled three days of celebration with dance and music.

2017 – “Here I’ll Stay” Youth Song and Dance Celebration was a chance for young people to join the nearly 150-year tradition. All participants and most composers and conductors were “children of freedom” - many born in or after 1991, the year Estonia regained independence. It was fascinating to see the young energy and their dedication to keep their heritage alive, adjusting and defining it in a new fresh way.

2019 – the 150th jubilee of the Song Celebrations “My Fatherland is my Love” brings together 35 000 singers and 10 000 dancers, a record-breaking number of participants.