

Lithuanian Song Festivals as a European cultural phenomenon



Figure 1 The logo of the XVI Lithuanian National Song Festival

The choral singing has always been something more than just a singing. The collective entity as well as the collective survival is built in the human essence. There is no doubt that the joined performance through singing is a type of self-realization of the person's artistic and aesthetic needs. However, the choral singing simultaneously gives a strong common feeling, a feeling of solidarity that helps develop wings to fly high towards higher human aims and ideas. Feeling this aura through singing is applicable on smaller nations, on the nations that survived the pressure of the conquerors and their stride to preserve their own languages and national traditions. Vladas Jakubėnas, a prominent Lithuanian composer, says, "The concert of united choirs, all devoted to the song, expresses the unity of the nation in a way, strengthens the consciousness for the song. Such nations develop special culture of mass choral song." Jonas Bendorius, another Lithuanian composer from the early XX century, says, "The history of each nation reaches special moments, moments of illumination when the song receives very important role. Few soloist singers are not enough in moments like that." Professor Artaras Budriūnas, famous Lithuanian choral conductor, once said: "The notion of the massive choir lies in the fact that socio-psychological mechanism, in co-operation with the artistic mechanism, significantly increases and activates the general integrative effect of the song."

UNESCO in 2003 recognized the Lithuanian song festivals as being of the highest degree of immaterial and anagogic heritage. Same evaluation received the equivalent song festival in Latvia and Estonia.

What really are the Lithuanian song festivals and what made them worth for gaining such an important international recognition? The brief answer will be - they are specific and they are of great importance both for the Lithuanian national culture and for the culture of the world in general. The Lithuanian song festivals are unique "universal" manifestation of the national artistic culture with significant influence on the spiritual, social, and political development of the Lithuanian nation. To make it simple, this is a gathering of music fans from various fields of amateur art using their own artistic activity to demonstrate their creative potential, accomplishing the idea that every man, every citizen, is creator, author of cultural values.

The song is in the basis of these festivals even though they improved during the time and some other genres and events like choreography performances, instrumental music, academic and traditional music, folk dances, traditional crafts, etc. were added to the program.



Figure 2 United choirs perform at the song Festival 2003

However, the most impressive event of the Festival is the joined outdoor performance of almost 400 choirs (comprising some 20,000 singers) conducted by sole conductor. The event was held on a specially chosen location and it bears the resemblance of the promenade concerts widely known among the people of the Western Europe and America where brass bands or symphonic orchestras perform for people in parks that are walking and resting while listening to the music.

The huge united choir for the Lithuanian Song Festival in the state capital Vilnius, consisting of mixed choirs, women, and men choirs, performs an up to three-hour long concert repertoire of folk songs and original pieces from various periods of time by Lithuanian as well as by composers from abroad. The choir performance is a cappella but an expanded brass or symphonic orchestra can also accompany it. Special segment is the performance of the children choirs, beside the fact that they have their own traditional children song festival designed to extend the tradition of choral singing in the state.

That is not all, not the entire Song Festival. The concert of the united choir is just a single part of the three-day long festival. Parts of the Festival are the performances of joined dance ensembles, folk ensembles, vocal-instrumental folk ensembles, exhibitions of traditional artisan's products, etc. There was even a musical staged during the last Song Festival held in 2003. Those are the modern-age, non-traditional elements from the Festival schedule that rarely get approval from the audience.

The above-mentioned facts create just a modest picture to a person who had never attended a festival similar to this one. Now, some facts on the history and the development of the Festival are following.

The song, as well as the language, has always been an inseparable part of the national entity and the culture for the people of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as well for all the other nations in the world. Moreover, there are moments in the history of a nation when these elements are endangered and there is a need to protect them.

The origins of the song festivals are in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1843 when 80 choirs performed united for the first time. This type of combined singing soon came to Germany, Scandinavian countries and than to Baltic states. The first song festival in the Baltic states

was held in the city of Tartu, Estonia, in 1869, while the next festival was organized in Latvia in 1873.

These are some of the comments made by the Lithuanian witnesses of their neighbors' festivals at the beginning of the XX century:

"All choirs were dressed in national costumes. There are managers, merchants, doctors, and students singing in the choirs. The President of the Republic was in the audience accompanied by the members of the Government, diplomatic corps, high military dignitaries /.../ Looked like the entire population sung together. You should have a heart made of stone so not to join the Latvians in their joy and to prevent the tears from rolling down." (J. Žilevičius, 1923).

Another quote from that time:

"The Estonian song festival history is tightly connected to the national awakening, to the cultural progress as well to the progress of the country in general. The festivals helped the Estonians not to lose their national unity, fellowship, and the national characteristics. /.../ The festivals helped to walk the road to freedom." (J. Žadeika, 1923)

Lithuania followed the Estonian and Latvian examples. Lithuanian own experience and the experiences of the neighboring states created the conditions needed for organizing such song festival. The first Lithuanian Song Festival was organized in 1924 in the city of Kaunas, than interim Lithuanian capital (the actual capital Vilnius was occupied by Poland). More than 3,000 singers participants of this Song Festival and performed the national anthem and 34 songs. A 120-member orchestra of wind instruments accompanied the choirs that, as stated in the papers, came to Kaunas by trains, by boats or hay-riding bringing along their food, folk costumes and their choir flags. All the participants, both performers and the audience, of each song festival, and especially those of the first festival, experienced loads of great spiritual attractiveness and power. The feeling of national unity and the love for the native country that filled each soul is well described in the song by J. Naujalis and Maironis:

*You are beautiful my dear fatherland,
A land where heroes sleep in the graves*

The first Lithuanian Song Festival was organized in 1924 with memories still fresh of the time when tsarist Russia forbade the usage of Lithuanian language and alphabet, and did many other things to suppress and demoralize the Lithuanian nation by keeping it illiterate and in a darkness. That is the reason for the first Song festival being so full of national self-respect and strong self-consciousness.

The second Song Festival was in 1928 celebrating the 10-th anniversary of the national independence of Lithuania. The third was in 1930, dedicated to the 500-year jubilee of the Lithuanian king Vytautas. The Lithuanian Ministry of education, department of culture decided in 1939 to establish legal framework for the song festivals. Hence, the decision was that local song festivals in small cities will be held annually, and the festival on national level will be organized every fifth year. The regular IV edition of the Song Festival was organized for the first time in the free national capital Vilnius in 1946.

There were nine editions of the Song Festival organized during the 50-year long Soviet Union occupation of the Lithuania. They were kind of a symbol of the economic achievements during the well known "five-year plans" as well of the leading role of the communist party.

Number of participants in the nine regular Song Festivals during the Soviet era:

<i>Edition</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
IV Song Festival	1946	11,778
V Song Festival	1950	26,500
VI Song Festival	1955	31,538
VII Song Festival	1960	33,936
VIII Song Festival	1965	31,832
IX Song Festival	1970	29,092
X Song Festival	1975	34,973
XI Song Festival	1980	36,001
XII Song Festival	1985	38,865

Choir singers make almost 70% of all participants of the festivals (the rest were dancers, musicians from folk ensembles and classical music orchestra, members of folk groups, artisans, etc.

The Soviet-era festivals, as it can be seen from the figures stated above, had large number of participants coming from every social group. The communist party had the leading role since it was considered that so called artistic activities help the ideological shaping up of a nation and, fortunately in this case, the results of this molding were positive. The communist party provided great administrative and, most important of all, financial support to the festivals. That boosted the performance quality that reached its peak during the 1980 -1985 period.



Figure 3 The Vingis park festival shell-like stage

The Song Festival developed during the years, improved and enriched its program by introducing new genres. Each edition of the festival brings something new:

- The special concert for choreographic ensembles was established for the first time in 1950 and the festival changed its name into Festival of Song and Dance. Ever since then, a specific concert is scheduled when such ensembles present, specially choreographed by different choreographers, performances of stylized folk dances;
- In the year 1960 the so-called folk bands consisting of violins, double bass, trumpet, clarinet, accordion, and percussions were invited to perform;
- The folk music ensembles comprising folk bands, dancers, and vocal group (similar to the Macedonian "Tanec" folk ensemble) appeared for the first time in 1970;

- The year 1980 marks the first performance of a string orchestra and that of a combined wind orchestra at the festival. The musicians use more frequently the traditional instruments like *birbynė*, *skudučiai*, *lumzdeliai*, *ragai* (all of them being wind instruments), *kanklės* (string instrument like the zither), and *skrabalai*, and *būgnai* (sort of percussions) and increases the number of orchestras employing them;
- The vocal folk ensembles singing authentic traditional songs got on stage in 1985, the same year when the special shell-like stage, acoustically designed to improve the sound of choral singing and to protect the choir from rain, was erected in the Vingis park in Vilnius.

Despite the fact that the song festivals organized in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were considered the peek of the ideologically supported artistic self-expression, Moscow knew this definition was incomplete and called our festivals "nationalistic manifestation". There was a great degree of truth in this definition. However, the beginning of the Perestroika in the mid-1980s brought us hope that will bring back the state independence we lost in 1940. The song festivals full of national, patriotic repertoire and mutual spiritual strive were extremely important to unite the nation on the road to achieve the aim we longed for. Thus, the national liberation fight in the three Baltic states is called "the singing revolution".

Lithuania regained the freedom in 1991 and, despite all the difficulties, the song festival tradition goes on.

The XIII song Festival was held in 1990 with 32,833 participants. The following editions of the Festival (XIV, XV, and XVI) respectively organized in 1994, 1998, and 2003 were named The Song Festival of all Lithuanians in the World. There was a special extraordinary edition of the festival to observe its 80th anniversary was held in Kaunas in 1994.

These last festivals were held in completely different political and cultural atmosphere. Lithuanian choirs from around the world (USA, Canada, Australia, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia) came here for the first time. In addition, everybody was delighted of the mutual song and love for their compatriots, "one nation - one culture".

"We" ("Mes") was the creed of the XVI Song Festival, organized in 2003 to celebrate the 750 anniversary of the coronation of King Mindaugas of Lithuania. The aim was to rediscover important historical facts, refresh the people's memory on the national cultural heritage, and on great names from our past that either fainted during the Soviet age, or were deliberately deleted.



Figure 4 The logo of the 2006 Chicago Song festival

Here are few words on the Lithuanian song festivals organized behind the Lithuanian borders. The Lithuanians living abroad, due to political or economical reasons, retain the tradition of organizing song festivals in their new countries. The first song festival organized abroad was held in New York City, USA, in 1938. The next festival was in Würzburg, Germany, in 1946. Soon followed festivals in Australia, Philadelphia, USA, and Canada. The largest festivals with highest quality are organized in Chicago, USA, a city with immense Lithuanian community.

So far, seven international song festivals have been organized abroad: in Chicago, USA (1956, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1983, and 1991) and in Toronto. The next international song festival will be in 2006 again in Chicago, and the next national XVII Song festival will be in Vilnius in 2007.

Despite the quite positive attitude on the character of the Lithuanian song and dance festival, increased the number of panels held on the future of the festival and its content. The question is whether the festivals should provide fun and entertainment for people, or they will be serious, academic gatherings of the brightest minds, kind of a national assembly where the participants (both the performers and the audience) use the song and dance to ponder about the past, the present, and the future of their nation, state. The discussion goes on.

The process of globalization in the economy, in the employment as well in the arts and the culture will definitely modify the national aspect among the peoples and states. That is the inevitable destiny of the song festivals, too. The festivals of the future will probably have different character and will become more international. It sounds like a utopia when talking how these festivals arrived from Western Europe to the three Baltic states where they settled, strengthened, and now the festivals might get back to their roots. There is no reasonable obstacle to a huge united choir from entire Europe (Macedonia included) to sing together and to make true the great Schiller's idea for united millions.

This article did not touch many quite relevant features related to the Lithuanian song festivals: the repertoire, conductors, choir managers, financial, technical, artistic, and other issues important for the success. I can say that all these and other problems are part of the agenda of the Center for national culture, special national institute acting under the Lithuanian Ministry of culture and education. The Center is in charge of coordinating all the different genres of popular amateur arts and it is working regularly all year round.

At the very end, I enclose a citation from the UNESCO Resolution:

"The tradition of the song festivals, as cultural tradition of the past and the present, will live as long as the amateur artistic ensembles live and as long the society feels the need for this kind of presentation"

Literature used:

V. Jakelaitis, "Dainu šventės", Vilnius, 1975

R. Gudelis, "Chorinis menes lietuviu tautos kultūroje", Klaipėda 2003

"Tėvynės balsai", Kaunas, 2004