

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MUSIC

## Singing for Freedom

Suddenly a tiny country feels like a very big place.



The quintennial Laulupidu festival this year featured 42,000 performers. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

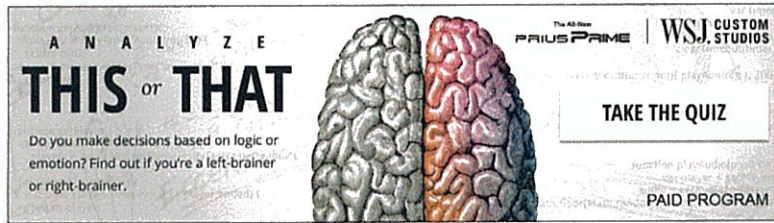
By BRETT CAMPBELL

July 16, 2014 6:33 p.m. ET

*Tallinn, Estonia*

Estonians say that everything changes in Tallinn during the week of the quintennial song and dance festival everyone calls Laulupidu. The northern Baltic nation's long, dark winters give way to 20 hours of sunshine per day, tourists arrive, and the normally reserved natives of this tiny nation (population 1.3 million) exuberantly celebrate the music and dance of their unique culture and history. This year's festival was attended by 153,000 spectators and featured 42,000 performers, including more than 1,000 choirs and 654 dance groups, who over the course of three days reveled in traditional and contemporary Estonian music and dances in often-multitudinous aggregations.

While most performers were selected by local auditions, the festival also chose a few foreign ensembles from many applicants—including singers and dancers from Oregon's Unistus Choir. Director Lonnie Cline, of Clackamas Community College, fell in love with Estonian music when he first heard it at a choral conference two decades ago and founded Unistus, named after the Estonian word for "dream," to sing mostly traditional and contemporary Estonian music. "The Estonians take their music very seriously because that's how they've maintained their identity," Mr. Cline explains.



Laulupidu's periodic flowering of traditional music and dance amid months of cold and darkness mirrors Estonia's history: centuries of oppression and occupation from successive waves of invaders (Danes, Swedes, Germans, Russians) who coveted the strategically located Baltic Sea port of Tallinn, punctuated by brief, bright periods of freedom. Though they've lived here for at least 8,000 years, Estonians have only enjoyed self-rule between 1920 and 1940 (when they briefly threw off the Russian imperial yoke) and since 1991. The giant rallies during the celebrated 1987-91 Singing Revolution, when Estonians defied Soviet prohibitions on singing their own songs, helped bring about Estonian independence after half a century of occupation.

Since liberation, the country has eagerly embraced Western institutions and ideas, including the European Union, market economics and information technology; Tallinn, birthplace of Skype, is one of Europe's most-wired cities. But given that Soviet occupation once cost Estonia its independence, official language (Russian replaced Estonian), economic prosperity and nearly a quarter of its population (via deportations, exile, the gulag or execution), Russia's current aggression against Ukraine has alarmed Estonians. They have reason to worry that the long night may return.

That's why the world's largest choral gathering was about much more than the music. The coincidence of the festival with Russian rumblings reminded Estonians of their own recent past. As chronicled in a pair of documentary films by James and Maureen Tusty ("The Singing Revolution," from 2007, and the new "To Breathe as One," airing on PBS stations this month), Laulupidu in particular and music in general has played a vital role in securing Estonia's brief, tenuous and vibrant democracy.

"Historically, the Estonians were serfs," Mr. Tusty explains. "The only way they could communicate their culture was by oral tradition. Estonian children learn music notation at the same time they learn the alphabet." The tiny country boasts a vast folk-song tradition and major composers like Arvo Pärt and Veljo Tormis. "Music is everywhere," says Ms. Tusty. "It's woven throughout the culture."

The massive turnout at Laulupidu this year (boosted somewhat by atypically sunny weather) suggests that today's Estonians are making up for the lost centuries when their ancestors weren't allowed to sing their songs.

A dance festival performance held in Tallinn's Kalev Stadium featured 9,000 dancers, ranging from preschool children to senior citizens, in traditional costumes, and including a delegation from Unistus. For two hours, in groups ranging from hundreds to thousands, they danced to live, amplified performances of the program's 27 songs dating from the 19th century to the present. The first part featured traditional music and folk dances; the second displayed contemporary dance and music; the third mixed older and newer styles. When asked why the third section, "Back Home," didn't continue the line from past to present to future, one Estonian woman replied, with perhaps unintentional ominousness, "there is no future."



On Saturday afternoon, it took thousands of participants six hours to march, eight abreast, the 3 miles in the opening procession from the picturesque Old Town's Freedom Square to the Laulupidu grounds nestled between a park and the Baltic Sea. Young and old marchers as well as viewers lining Narva Boulevard cheered, sang and grinned. Nowhere among the visitors and 1,450 foreign participants, including Russian and Russian-speaking Estonian choirs, did national pride veer into chauvinism.

During Laulupidu's performances (totaling 17 hours over one weekend, not counting the time needed for several thousand choristers and musicians to scramble to their places), announcers called out the names of conductors and composers to raucous applause. In Estonia, classical musicians are rock stars, too. Many of the 1,046 choirs received their own showcase before joining others to form colossal megachoirs.

Oregon's Unistus singers participated in both the mixed and massed choirs, learning 28 titles, plus another 19 (including non-Estonian music) they performed in an earlier tour of Estonian churches. "The audience reaction to our tour was phenomenal," Mr. Cline said. "All the concerts [produced] rousing standing ovations. We had to repeat certain songs. Some people in the audience were in tears."

The festival's historically oriented Saturday program featured a song from each of the previous 25 festivals, with a moment of silence reserved for the 1950 edition that allowed only Soviet propaganda songs. Another show lasting six hours mixed new and recent music, including this year's theme song, "Touch." Some songs were repeated despite the lengthy programs. "Everyone wanted to do every song again," marveled 21-year-old Unistus soprano Alyssa Rands. "When 32,000 people want to sing it again, there's no stopping them."

At the big moments—such as during the 1990 song "Time of Awakening," which premiered at the height of the Singing Revolution, and the traditional closing song, "My Fatherland Is My Love" (the once-banned 1947 unofficial national anthem performed spontaneously at earlier festivals in defiance of Soviet edicts)—tears flowed, arms linked, hundreds of Estonian flags waved. Marching and singing in the midst of thousands of their countrymen, a tiny country felt like a very big place.

Their hosts' musical rapture left a deep impression on the visiting Oregonians. With thousands of singers, achieving absolute precision is impossible, Ms. Rands says, but "what matters is the passion and community they're sharing."

Jaded American teens might roll their eyes at the prospect of dancing old polkas with their parents, dressing up like an 18th-century farmer or singing sometimes sentimental 19th-century anthems and bland power-ballad arrangements (along with some truly moving and musically substantial songs), but nowhere at the festival was there a sense of cynicism, youthful or otherwise. Maybe recent events in Ukraine reminded them that national autonomy could be fleeting. At a rehearsal, one chorister said, ruefully, "We're practicing for the next singing revolution."

*Mr. Campbell writes about West Coast performing arts.*