

THE
LATVIAN
SONG
AND
DANCE
CELEBRATION



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Once every five years, a small nation of 2 million people living by the Baltic Sea in Northern Europe, becomes the largest choir in the world. The Latvian Song and Dance Celebration has been our bonding ritual since 1873; a way to celebrate our identity and dignity. UNESCO has recognised this phenomenon as a masterpiece of humanity (List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, 2003).

The Song and Dance Celebration is one of the grandest festivals in the Baltic region in terms of scope, authenticity and style. Every five years in the beginning of July, the entire city of Rīga, the capital of Latvia, becomes a buzzing stage for choir singers and folk dancers, folklore musicians, masters of folk crafts and amateur theatre troupes, young and old, dressed in folk costumes, living the tradition.

How is it unique?

A nationwide amateur movement

Led by music professionals and sustained through the nation-wide network of cultural institutions, it is in essence a process for the people and by the people – all over the country. And it even goes global, as the Latvian diaspora abroad keep infesting foreigners with the virus of Latvian choir singing and folk dancing.

A capella singing in many voices

It is the core of our choir tradition. Performing in four voices – soprano, alto, tenor and bass – is the standard, but not the limit, as our amateur choirs can even perform pieces in eight voices.

Authenticity

The Song and Dance Celebration is all about Latvian traditions, therefore, wearing a folk costume creates the right atmosphere during the festival. We dress up to look and feel festive and unique.

Duration

The preparation lasts for five years, but the festival itself takes place for a week in the middle of summer. In the olden days, the beginning of July was the time when country folk could afford to take some time off between sowing and gathering hay.

Open-air factor

Most of the festival events take place outdoors, allowing us to be in touch with nature. Never mind the rain, wind or heat – we keep singing, dancing and enjoying ourselves regardless of the weather (after having prepared for this for five years, cancelling a concert due to the weather just wouldn't do!).

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Even though we borrowed the idea of singing festivals from the Germans, we have made it our thing, with mass participation, nationwide organisation and a stable model for the festival programme. We even have a special Song and Dance Celebration Law, assigning this movement special status.



© Kaspars Rocis

Why do people do it?

Helmutis, 19, Rīga.

“I have been dancing since I was three when my parents took me to a children’s dance group. In my early teenage years, I thought dancing in folk dances wasn’t cool, but now it’s trendy. I will even be wearing my folk costume on my graduation party this year. For me dancing means being with friends, and when I dance, I don’t think about my problems or anything else. Besides, I think folk dancers are more energetic and they smile more than the rest of the people. So, I will keep doing it all my life – I can’t imagine not doing it.”

Ilze’s story:

In her family, taking part in the Song Celebration has been a tradition since 1888, started by her great-great-grandparents – the seamstress Ilze and the carpenter Jānis, and continued by their daughters Maija and Gunta. Maija’s teenage daughter Anda wanted to join an adult choir so much that she cut her long hair in order to look older and be able to participate in the Song Celebration. In the same choir, her brother Uldis met his future wife. Ilze’s mother often took her daughter to choir rehearsals and concerts, and Ilze first participated in the 1990 Celebration. At that festival, Ilze’s husband Jānis was one of the dancers, but later joined the choir. Today, both of their daughters, Madara and Katrīna, continue the family tradition. For all of them, the Song and Dance Celebration is a hobby and a platform for emotions, as well as a habit passed down from generation to generation. (The Song and Dance Celebration Newsletter, #01, 2017)



Agnese, 40, London, works in investment banking:

“I’ve been away from Latvia for 20 years, and have been a member of the Latvian choir in London for the last five years. We are a very close-knit lot there; it is fun to go to rehearsals every Wednesday evening to meet them, take part in concerts and thus feel a little closer to Latvia. Singing songs in my native language is like food for my soul, and compensates for not being able to visit Latvia as often as I’d like. I feel very nostalgic about my home country, and singing Latvian songs sometimes makes me well up, but they are happy tears as I feel enormous pride about our culture. I’m even contemplating joining a Latvian dance group – it will definitely be more fun than going to the gym, and will keep Latvia even closer to my heart.” .

Gunta Paškovska, a long-time choir conductor from Jelgava admits: “Only when you stand at Mežaparks Stage together with others, do you feel the enormous power. Thousands of choir singers become one. The conductor, too, feels the power coming from the choirs. When I was standing on top of the tribune as Principal Conductor, I feared I would faint from the excitement. But when I started conducting, I was overwhelmed with the sensation that I was holding thousands of singers in the palm of my hand.” (The “lr” magazine, issue #24 (425))

Festival programme

- 65 events in 7 days
- around 500 000 spectators
- The great dance performance, *Māra's zeme* (*Māra's Country*): 17,000 dancers, 28 dances by 20 choreographers, supervised by ten Dance Directors and nine Honorary Dance Directors.
- The Closing concert, *Zvaigžņu ceļā* (*Following the Starry Path*): 12,000 singers, 38 choir songs, 3 hours, supervised by 13 Principal Conductors and eight Honorary Principal Conductors.

43 290 participants of which

- 16 500 singers from 427 choirs
- 18 174 dancers from 739 dance groups as well as thousands of musicians, masters of folk and applied arts, amateur theatre and folklore ensembles
- Amateur groups from 118 (out of 119) of Latvia's municipalities and 21 countries participate

Logistics

- 70 educational institutions in Riga involved in hosting the participants
- 1200 busses assigned to transport all participants to and from the festival venues
- 400 000 litres of water supplied to quench the thirst of participants
- 45 000 raincoats distributed to participants (enough to cover eight football fields)

General facts

- The Latvian Song Celebration – a tradition since 1873
- Dance Celebration as part of the festival since 1948
- Included in the UNESCO List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003





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THE PROCESS

To us, it is more than a festival. It is a perpetual process of hard and systematic work on a daily basis – built on centuries-old traditions, fuelled by grass-roots power, led by culture professionals and supported by the state. Above all, we do it because it is fun.

Recipe for a miracle

- 1) Take 40 000 people of all ages, different social, cultural and professional backgrounds,
- 2) add a few dozen songs and dances impressed into their minds, hearts and limbs by 800 conductors, group leaders and dance instructors,
- 3) let it ferment for five years, and – voilà! The Song and Dance Celebration is ready to begin!

During the five-year period between the festivals, we diligently attend rehearsals in evenings and on weekends to learn new songs and dances, to get the programme down for the upcoming Song and Dance Celebration. Conductors and dance directors revise repertoires, trying to find the right proportion between popular classic pieces and new contemporary ones; composers and choreographers work on new songs and dances, while stage directors and scenographers prepare the scene for the grand performance. Masters of folk crafts come together for seminars and workshops to share knowhow and set off on making more folk costumes for both participants and spectators.

Ardour is an important element of the process – regular contests help maintain the level of quality of the festival, as well as raise the prestige of the venture, motivating the participants to try harder. A year before the festival is the time for auditions in front of Principal Conductors and Dance



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Directors of the festival. The purpose is to select choirs, dance and music groups qualified to be participants of the Celebration.

Song Battles is the oldest and most prestigious contest, where the best amateur choirs compete. Traditionally, the event takes place in the Great Hall of the University of Latvia and is open to the public. Choirs are evaluated in various categories – mixed choirs, men’s choirs, women’s choirs and senior choirs. The winners are announced at the end of the event, triggering unforgettable emotions in the contestants and audience alike.

System of support

Central and local governments help sustain a nation-wide network of culture centres and music schools as places for rehearsals and concerts. Apart from the 559 municipal culture centres serving as bases for amateur groups, many schools and universities have their own choirs and dance ensembles. The biggest support, however, comes from families. Parents often take an active part in the life of their talented offspring, accompanying them on concert tours, taking care of folk costumes, as well as providing all kinds of moral and practical support. Besides, it is a good way to socialise with like-minded parents.



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broadcasts from main events must be arranged, and spectator flows organised. Above all, the festival should become an unforgettable cultural adventure! The Latvian National Centre for Culture is not only in charge of organising the festival, but is also the caretaker of our intangible cultural heritage, and looks after the preservation of the Song and Dance Celebration process.

To lend the organisers a hand with smaller and bigger tasks, hordes of volunteers are recruited for the festival. Usually, they are young people aged 16 and older, with good knowledge of Latvian, English and Russian. For the 2018 Celebration, 1600 people have volunteered to help.

Organisation

If at first song festivals were projects implemented by singing societies, today the challenge is probably equal to that of organising the Olympics.

The audience is demanding – repertoires and programmes are debated and criticised, but a shortage of tickets could lead to an uprising (these days mostly on social media, thankfully). Tens of thousands of participants need a place to sleep, to eat three nutritious meals a day, and get around. Medical, security and other services must be on duty at every major festival location, journalists need to be accredited, live



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Venues

The growing popularity of the Celebration has been a challenge to Rīga's public infrastructure, and a drive for development. In different times, various venues around the city were adapted and transformed to host the festival - for many decades it was Esplanāde Square (in 1888, 1923, 1926, 1931, 1933, 1948, 1950), but in 1938, it took place in Victory Square (today - Victory Park) on the left-bank-side of the city.

During the festival, the entire city becomes a stage for concerts, performances and fairs, occupying the city's churches, parks and squares, and bigger and smaller concert halls. However, there are two venues, which are of special significance to the Celebration.



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Mežaparks Grand Stage -

in the outskirts of Riga, amidst pine forest in the suburb of Mežaparks, lies a complex of buildings and an open-air amphitheatre built in 1950 specifically for the purposes of the Song and Dance Celebration. It is where the main concerts of the festival take place. The stage has undergone major reconstruction and redesigning works for the 2018 Celebration to host 11 000 singers and 35 000 spectators.



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Daugava Stadium -

the multifunctional stadium built in 1958 in the Grīziņkalns suburb of Rīga, is the place where 17,000 dancers perform at the Great Dance Concert, creating complex geometric patterns as they dance. Reconstructed in 2018, its seating capacity exceeds 10,400.

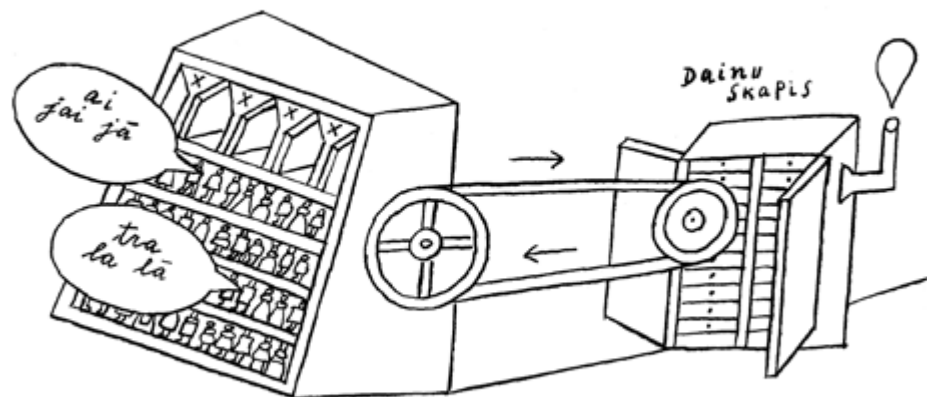


Illustration: Māris Bisofs

Dainu skapis - the Cabinet of Folksongs

This piece of furniture, made in 1880, is a data storage device containing 200,000 manuscripts of Latvian folksongs, or Dainas, collected by the folklorist, Krišjānis Barons. Prior to this, Dainas had only existed in oral form, passed on from generation to generation. Thanks to Barons' idea to write them down, we know about 1.2 million of them today. Even though the biggest value is its contents, the Cabinet of Folksongs itself has become a symbol of Latvian national culture. In 2001, Dainu skapis was inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World register.

Repertoire

The festival repertoire range goes all the way from folksongs and sacral music to classic and contemporary choral pieces by Latvian composers. Our singing tradition is rooted in folksongs, or Dainas – compact four-to-six-line verses covering all possible topics of a human life, from birth to death and everything in between. They are the essence of the Latvian worldview, and often serve as a springboard for new forms of expression in music and dance. In the mid-1800s, when choir singing took root in Latvia, there were no Latvian choir songs to sing, so composers turned to folk music for inspiration.

When it comes to content, there are songs hailing the beauty of nature, relationships between people, our traditional values and virtues, in fact anything that is related to a human life. We also sing about our past sufferings, probably as a way of getting over our collective traumas. After all, most of our history has been a constant struggle for our right to exist.



Gaisma pils

(The Castle of Light)

Composed in one day, on 21 June, 1899, by Jāzeps Vītols. Lyrics by Auseklis, this choral ode for five voices is the symbol of the Celebration and is performed at the climax of the Closing concert.

A tale of a mystical castle, which symbolises the collected wisdom, virtues and aspirations of the Latvian nation. The castle sinks underground when its people are oppressed by foreign powers, but is said to rise again when the people strive for light – an allegory for education and spiritual enlightenment. This ode ends on an emotionally uplifting note: the people call the light, the light dawns and the Castle of Light rises up from oblivion, shining the light of its people far and wide.

Saule, Pērkons. Daugava

(Sun, Thunder, Daugava)

A song by Mārtiņš Brauns (1988), lyrics based on the classic poem, The Daugava (1916), by Rainis, for mixed choirs with instrumental accompaniment.

A story about a people (Latvians) living by the sea, in a green land. In spite of foreign invasions and other historic hardship, they are under the protection of its gods and forces of nature – the Sun as the giver of life, the Thunder, which fights off all evil and the River Daugava carrying the waters of life and death.



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Sasala jūrīna

(The Sea Froze)

An old Liv folk song. Thanks to its vigorous tune, it has become one of the favourites among the dancers.

Sings praise for the virtues of women living on the coast of the Amber Sea (the Baltic Sea). “The sea froze down to its bed, now it’s a good time to go to the Land of Amber to look for a bride for my brother.” The young man admires the kindness of the girl and her rich dowry filled with amber – a synonym for riches.



Tumša nakte, zaļa zāle

(Dark night, green grass)

Folk song, one of the favourites during Nocturnal sing-alongs.

“Dark is the night, green is the grass, I let my horse out into the meadow. Now he is in your hands, God.” The horse gets lost in the fog, and the young man prays to God, entrusting the fate of the horse to him. At dawn, the horse returns unharmed. The uniqueness of Latvian folksongs lies in the way symbolic parallels between the natural world and human life are revealed in metaphor. The song is about placing trust in higher forces to show us the way when we feel powerless. At times, getting lost is the only way of finding our true spirit.



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Pūt, vējiņi!

(Blow, Wind!)

The ancient Liv marriage song, and its 1884 adaptation for choirs by Andrejs Jurjāns has become one of the most popular songs of the Song Celebration.

“Blow, wind, my boat towards Courland,” pleads a young man, in order to get to his promised bride. However, upon arrival he meets with reluctance from the side of the bride’s family who think he is not a serious enough man for their daughter. But he responds with dignity that he is an independent man, free in his actions and means, and is proud not to depend on other people’s opinions. “I drink with my own money, and ride my own horse, I choose my own bride without asking the mother and father.”





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Multi-culturalism

The Song Celebration has always been about Latvian culture and traditions, but everyone is welcome to join in.

In 2016, alongside the 61.8 per cent of Latvians, there were 25.6 per cent Russians, 3.4 per cent Belarussians, 2.3 per cent Ukrainians, 2.1 per cent Poles and 4.8 per cent other nationalities living in Latvia. Not only do people of other nationalities join Latvian choirs and dance groups – there is a day during the Celebration when the various cultural and ethnic groups of Latvia are in the spotlight. Altogether about 1500 people from one hundred culture groups are taking part in the 2018 Celebration, acquainting the audiences with their sacral and secular heritage through music, dance, crafts and cuisine.

Diaspora & choir-singing tradition around the world

Latvian diaspora around the world proves that collective singing and dancing is our natural format. Even when away from home – temporarily or permanently – Latvians form choirs and dance groups in their new countries of residence as a way of maintaining “Latvianness” and emotional ties with Latvia.

Strengthened by the “new diaspora” – a result of the economic migration of the 21st century – Latvians keep forming choirs and dance groups around the world as a means of maintaining their cultural identity and feeling closer to home.

Among those 150,000 Latvians who fled the country during WWII and initially ended up in displaced persons camps in Germany, there were many popular musicians, composers and conductors. To keep the spirit up and unite the Latvian refugee community, song days were organised at the camps, sowing the seed for future Latvian song celebrations in exile. The first Refugee Latvian Song Celebration took place in 1947, in Eslingen, Germany, with 1000 choir singers and 10,000 spectators, followed by Song festivals in the USA (Chicago in 1953, Seattle in 1962, San Francisco in 1967, Boston in 1978, Milwaukee in 1983, etc.), Canada (regular festivals in Toronto) and the Latvian Annual Culture days in Australia.

There are about 370,000 Latvians living in 120 countries around the world today, and the number of diaspora choirs and dance groups taking part in the Celebration in Rīga has reached a thousand. Many of their members are spouses to Latvians and have become passionate converts to the Latvian cultural tradition.

You do not have to be Latvian or married to one to love choir singing. In 2018, there are two foreign choirs taking part in the Celebration – the choir, Gaisma, from Japan, who are second-time participants of the festival, and the Tartu University Chamber Choir from Estonia. Both choirs have learnt the festival repertoire, all in Latvian, to be able to take part in the Latvian culture phenomenon.



THE PARTICIPANTS

They are the heartbeat of the Song and Dance Celebration, representing various social backgrounds and all kinds of amateur culture in Latvia.

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Choir singers

They are the medium of primal vibrations. Singing unites us and has a therapeutic effect on our psyche. With their singing, choirs connect us to centuries of tradition and express our common sentiments.

Choir singers are the key element of the Celebration. They usually group in formations of 20 to 40 people, making up men's, women's or mixed choirs. Controlled and directed by a conductor, a choir is a platform not only for cultivating talent, but also for socialising. For each festival, choir singers learn 20 to 30 new songs off by heart. Those who cannot read scores learn their part by ear. In Latvia, the ability to sing is probably the most useful of talents as it can be applied anywhere, at any time – parties, weddings or funerals, because the instrument, the voice, is always there.



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Folk dancers

They represent the physical aspect of our heritage, the manifestation of vitality and love of life. Folk dancers come in pairs, as our dancing tradition is mostly for and about couples. Today, there are about 800 dance groups formed of 8, 16, 24 or 32 members, divided by age – young, middle-aged and senior. Each dancer knows 15 dances on average. Stately and active, they are like a closed “caste” where friends are made, couples form, children are born and brought up, most likely as future dancers.

By the way, if the title of your dance group is “Sānsolis”, meaning both “side step” and “an affair”, you probably have a good sense of humour. It seems that folk dancers are a rather humorous lot, as there are three dance groups in Latvia with that title – in Ādaži, Aloja and Svēte.



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Kokle players

They represent a cultured expression of our northern mentality. Quiet and gentle, our national stringed instrument, the kokle, is more suitable for solitary musical meditation, yet can produce impressive sounds when played by large ensembles. The concert kokle, a zither-like instrument on removable legs, is more popular with girls, who form the majority of the country's 70 kokle ensembles, but the ethnographic kokle enchants both men and women, as it is a simple, yet versatile instrument, often handmade by the player. Recent experiments show that the sound of the kokle goes well with almost anything, be it heavy metal or electronic dance music.

Brass orchestras

They are the mascots of cheerful celebration and parade. Brass orchestras are formations of 15 to 20 musicians, with an energetic conductor in front of them. Initially, brass orchestras of fire-fighting societies joined the Song Celebration to add vigour to the parade and provide a festive atmosphere at other events. In 2018, there are about 64 amateur brass orchestras taking part in the Song and Dance Celebration, and their performance ranges from chamber-like finesse to the magnificence of a full brass orchestra. At the traditional Grand Concert, the brass orchestras amaze us with new forms of expression and musical innovation.



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Folklorists

They are the keepers of ancient wisdom and knowhow, who nurture traditions by living them.

Authenticity is their mantra, in both what they do and how they live. Being a folklorist is a lifestyle where singing, dancing and playing up to five musical instruments come naturally, and modern folksongs are born with ease. The art of being a folklorist boils down to learning by doing. Many of Latvia's over 200 ethnographic ensembles and folklore groups are fully-fledged participants of the festival, performing in Rīga's parks and squares and drawing passers-by into their performances.



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Amateur theatre troupes

They embody the aspect of transformation and reflection.

Joining a troupe allows its members to become someone else for a while, be in the spotlight after a day of hard work and live other, possibly more exciting lives than their own.

For the first time amateur theatre troupes took part in the Song Celebration in 1895, in Jelgava, where the first Latvian theatre troupe was established a year before by actor and playwright, Ādolfs Alunāns. At that time, professional Latvian theatre did not exist, so amateur theatre was a way to talk about topics important to

the Latvian audience. Alunāns' plays are mostly comedies about country life, addressing issues like education and spiritual enlightenment through jokes and satire, as well as ridiculing character traits of a typical Latvian. During the 2018 Celebration, 15 of Alunāns' plays are performed in Vērmanes Garden by the best of Latvia's 428 amateur troupes.

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Masters of folk crafts

They represent the material dimension of the tradition, where practicality meets beauty. Artisans preserve the old by creating the new. Working alone, or as part of a folk crafts studio, they are the holders of the practical knowhow passed on from hand to hand, from master to apprentice, from generation to generation. How to bake rye bread, to turn a piece of clay into a beautiful pot, how to create fine silver jewellery or make a magnificent folk costume - only true artisans know how much love and effort constitutes a masterpiece. In the age of consum-

erism, they represent sustainability - made of local materials, applying traditional methods without causing harming to the environment, and which, when carefully looked after, can last for many years.

During the festival, the masterpieces by true artisans can be admired in folk craft exhibitions, but a colourful selection of wares by local craftsmen are for sale in numerous fairs in Rīga's parks and squares.

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Conductors and dance directors

They are the power element - leadership through discipline and inspiration. Without a Principal Conductor or a Dance Director, a choir of 12,000 singers or a formation of 17,000 dancers would be just a gathering of different people with conflicting opinions. This vocation requires strong leadership skills and integrity, temperament and personality, to make the crowds follow your lead.



Principal Conductors of the Song and Dance Celebration are selected from among professional conductors and choir leaders, in a lengthy process, which takes place before every festival. There are also Honorary Principal Conductors, a title assigned for life to those who have made a significant contribution during their lifetime to the process of song celebration. One of them, Roberts Zuika, took part in the Closing concert in 2013 at the age of 100. In the olden days, Principal Conductors were often thrown up in the air by the singers as a sign of immense adoration and honour, but today we limit the expression of grace to rapturous applause and loud cheering.

A special place in the song celebration tradition is held by female conductors, inspiring singers with their spiritual energy, and are proof of the strength of Latvian women. Terēzija Broka and Ausma Derkēvica have been legendary conductors and choir leaders, and their mission is now continued by a younger generation of professionals like Aira Birziņa and Agita Ikauniece.

Even though Dance Directors are less visible to the general audience than the conductors, they are like magicians creating a meticulously organised marvel. Dance Directors possess multi-dimensional thinking to envisage complex dance patterns, and the way how individual dancers can create them with certain dance steps and choreographic methods. Precise mathematics is required to calculate the necessary amount of dancers on the stadium and the optimal distances between them in order to create the designed ornaments. All dances are schematically depicted on paper, with 5-6 drawings per dance, allocating a 64-square-metre plot per dance group. The result is a visually and emotionally impressive performance.



Writing down conductors' witty quotes during rehearsals is a hobby of many singers, and a source of humour for general public:

“There are three rehearsals left till the moment of shame.”

“Now sing as if you had a storm in your mouth!”

“You can say you are tired when I see your heads spinning.”



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Audience

There are hundreds of thousands of them, falling into various categories:

families and friends of participants; sworn traditionalists who attend every Celebration dressed in folk costumes and sing along to most songs; the spontaneous kind who are there for the atmosphere, caring less for the actual performance; occasional Celebration goers who usually watch the concerts on TV, but when they attend a concert they leave early to avoid traffic jams; curious tourists who look slightly confused about what is going on, so they diligently capture

everything on photo or video to later try and grasp what it was that they experienced. There are critics, too, of course – they have an opinion about everything: repertoire, organisers, participants, lack of car parking space around concert venues. A special kind are the Latvian diaspora – they come to reaffirm their cultural identity, see old friends and obtain proof that Latvia is the only place in the world where they feel truly at home.

Exporting the celebration

The Song and Dance Celebration is one of our export goods. Over time, different variations of the tradition have developed, uniting specific audiences around the traditional singing and dancing tradition – Latvian School Youth Song and Dance Festival, The Baltic and Nordic Song Festival, Baltic Students' Song and Dance Festival, as well as Latvian diaspora song and dance festivals abroad.



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INGREDIENTS OF THE FESTIVAL

Many ingredients of the festival in its almost 150-year history have come and gone, but the core elements have stayed the same, as part of the ritual.

There is not one folk costume, but over a hundred variations affiliated to various regions and parishes of Latvia, with foreign influences most visible in the costumes of border areas.

Folk dress

Family heirlooms, brand new replicas of hundred-year-old originals on display in museums, or their simplified interpretations, folk costumes are the visual code of the Celebration, for participants and spectators alike.

It wasn't always like that. The participants of the first Celebration simply wore their best dress, and only in 1880, did a women's choir from Tirza arrive in folk dress, causing a positive furore in the audience. In 1888, most female participants were dressed in folk costumes, setting a trend for future celebrations.

It is not surprising that the debate about what is genuine folk dress is ongoing. In order to raise general awareness of how to make and wear a folk costume, as well as to improve the looks of the Celebration participants, the first folk dress contest was organised in 1931.

During Soviet times, the traditional costume was remodelled to make it more practical for dancing. The skirts became shorter, and button-fly trousers for men replaced the fly-less originals which were fastened with a belt. Artificial hair braids were invented to create a "folk maiden" look for women with shorter hair. In 1970s and 1980s, modern interpretations of the traditional dress became popular with choirs as their concert uniforms.

In the new millennium, the folk dress is trendy again. We see more people dressed in folk costumes on their wedding day, wearing them at other festive or official occasions, and playing with the elements of a folk costume in everyday clothing and design. An increasing number of visitors to the Song and Dance Celebration wear folk costumes, visually erasing boundaries between participants and spectators.



Kurzeme



Latgale



Vidzeme



Zemgale

Archaeological dress

is the reconstruction of clothing found in burial grounds of the 7th – 13th centuries when the territory of Latvia was inhabited by the Baltic tribes – Latgallians, Curonians, Semigallians, Selonians and Livs. Since the 1990s, this type of traditional dress has become increasingly popular, going hand in hand with the growing interest in the history of our forefathers.



Ethnographic dress

refers to the period of the 18th and 19th centuries – usually peasant's best dress, which was more exquisite in colours and ornaments than everyday clothing, and often made for a specific occasion. There are five main costume versions representing each cultural region of Latvia, with over a hundred variations in between, but the Krustpils costume is believed to capture the essence of the most typical Latvian colour combinations, ornaments and composition.



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The flag

Having a logo for an event is not just a sign of modern times. In the olden days, flags were made to mark the significance of a venture. Wealthy Latvian women donated money for the Līgo flag to be made in Leipzig, Germany, specifically for the first Song Celebration in 1873. The flag features a folklore character, sage Vaidelotis, in a holy grove during summer solstice (or Līgo) asking gods for favour and protection for the Latvian folk. Nowadays, the original flag is in the Museum of the History of Rīga and Navigation, and an exact replica has been made to be carried ahead of the Parade.



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The Parade

Just like in the Olympics, the purpose of the parade is to let every participant shine, and enjoy loud cheers of spectator crowds. All participants stride along the main street of Rīga, Brīvības Street, in a five-hour parade, grouped along the lines of the cultural regions they represent – Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Latgale, Zemgale, Sēlija and Rīga. Every choir, folklore or dance group gives an improvised performance as they stride, to stand out among other participants and to earn the loudest cheers. A tradition for women is to wear flower wreaths and wave bouquets of flowers. This is probably the most relaxed and cheerful event of the festival.



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Rehearsals

You might wonder why everyone can't rehearse at home, come to the festival prepared and go into the concert straight away? As we are talking about thousands of choir singers and dancers, rehearsals are not just about the swift movement of people on and off stage, but also establishing the necessary connection between the participants and Principal Conductors or Dance Directors. Choir rehearsals aim to achieve a nuanced and emotionally captivating performance envisaged by each Principal Conductor, while for the dancers it is the process of learning where to be and what movements to perform at each given moment in order to create massive dynamic geometrical patterns without falling out of rhythm. Rehearsal is a time for participants only, but tickets are available for dress rehearsals, allowing more people to see the performance.

Sunburn, blisters, fainting and wet feet

- rehearsals are often a test of resilience, as long hours in direct sunlight result in sunburn and sunstroke, or even fainting, but rainy weather gives participants wet feet, often resulting in a runny nose or loss of voice. Dancers are more prone to blisters and bruises, sprained ankles and physical exhaustion, so medical assistance is available in all festival venues. But all of it is nothing compared to the joy of participating in the Song and Dance Celebration!



© Jānis Romanovskis

Spartan living conditions.

Being a participant means putting one's customary comforts aside for a while. During the festival days, a two-square-metre space on the floor of a sports hall in one of Rīga's numerous schools becomes one's base, where a mattress and a sleeping bag can be placed. Queuing for all basic amenities like showers, toilets and food, getting dressed for concerts in crowded backstage rooms, resting on benches or lawns during rehearsal breaks, sleepless nights due to spontaneous parties are all part of the adventure. Eventually, hardships make us stronger and unite us with tighter bonds.



© Ilmārs Znotiņš



The Great Dance Concert

Imagine thousands of folk dancers of all ages creating a constantly changing kaleidoscope of colourful geometric patterns as they dance along to Latvian songs. The performances, created by the best Latvian choreographers and Dance Directors, are like a living multi-dimensional carpet where ancient signs and contemporary symbols are woven together to tell a story. In the 2018 Celebration, the dancers enliven the history of Latvia – from the times Latvia was inhabited by the Baltic tribes, to the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, and its centenary celebrations.

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The Closing Concert

It is the moment when levitating a few inches above the ground is fully legitimate because the power of music and the vibration of human voices is uplifting.

The Concert has its own inner logic, built around ritualised scenography and a sequence of songs as the catalysts of emotional catharsis, reached at the end of the concert with the singing of Gaismas pils. This is a time-tested mechanism, which lifts us above all of our daily problems, doubts and conflicts, to be overwhelmed by the strongest sense of unity and purpose. During this ritual held under open skies, we connect with one another and the universe.

Nocturnal Sing-along

What once started as a spontaneous afterparty, has become an integral part of the festival.

At the end of the Closing concert of the 2003 Celebration, both the audience and the singers felt so overwhelmed with emotion that instead of going home, they continued to sing popular songs until the Sun rose. Since then, the collective sing-along, which starts the moment the official concert ends and lasts until dawn, is part of the official programme. Often, singing continues in trams and busses, densely packed with emotionally uplifted passengers on their way home; a phenomenon known as “singing trams”. Fortunately, the day after is a day off.

To help spectators prepare for the sing-along, there is an app, DzieDot, with easy-to-follow instructions for learning Latvian folksongs.

© Jānis Romanovskis



The Closing Concert is the culmination of the festival, where hundreds of bigger and smaller choirs become a joint force of 12,000 singers, performing in front of an audience of 35,000.



HISTORY

Since the beginning, the Song Celebration has served different cultural and social, as well as political purposes, but its main mission has always been to unite us through cultural traditions, strengthening our unity and national identity.



A postcard, 1938. The National Library of Latvia

The 19th century: origins

The phenomenon of song celebrations is closely connected with the rise of Latvian national self-awareness at the end of the 19th century when Latvia was still part of the Russian Empire. Already in the early 1700s, a network of church parishes established in the central part of Latvia by German protestant missionaries contributed to the moral upbringing and literacy of the local population. A century later, with the abolishment of serfdom came personal freedom, but the introduction of general education, resulting in almost an 80 per cent literacy rate, was the first step towards the idea of self-determination of the Latvian people. The growing popularity of Latvian culture and singing societies emerging throughout the country signalled the beginnings of a Latvian nation.

The tradition of singing festivals, a concept originating from Germany, Switzerland and Austria, came to the Baltic region with the first singing festival for Baltic Germans, The Daugava River Music Festival, in 1836. Inspired by this tradition, a clergyman Juris Neikens organised the first gathering of Latvian men's choirs in Dikļi, in 1864, paving the way for similar singing events throughout the country, and consequently leading to the first Nationwide Latvian Song Celebration in 1873, in Rīga.

1873 – 1917: growing up to become a nation

1003 singing Latvians were drawn to the first celebration in 1873. Its opening ceremony at Rīga Latvian Society house, was the first time when the song, Dievs, svētī Latviju! (God Bless Latvia!), composed by Baumaņu Kārlis for the occasion, was performed. In 1920, it became Latvia's national anthem.

The programme of the first festival was divided into two parts – the concert of sacral music and the secular music concert with original songs by local composers. The first celebration put some fundamental elements of the Latvian song festival tradition in place, like Latvian original choral music as the core of the repertoire, the Song Battles contest for the best amateur choirs, the parade of the participants and sacral music concerts.

In the early 1900s, the political and economic situation had a notable impact on choir singing events. As the Song Celebration was organised by various societies and unions, their strivings were often in conflict with the governing ideology of the Russian Empire. The revolution of 1905 negatively affected the planning and organisation of the next festival – only three men's choirs from the Kurzeme region took part in the 1910 Celebration.



© The National Library of Latvia



A poster. Raimonds Šiško, 1938. The National Library of Latvia

artistic quality of the Celebration, quality control was introduced at all levels – creative contests for composers, selection auditions for choirs and training courses for choir conductors became a tradition. It fuelled the development of Latvian original choral music, performances became more diverse, technically complex, and brass bands, symphonic music and organ music were added to the mix.

In 1934, Latvia, too, fell victim to the “fashion” of authoritarianism, sweeping across Europe at the time. The local president, Kārlis Ulmanis, took the celebration under his wing and used it for strengthening his regime through nationalistically patriotic repertoire. Special venues and festival sites were built to host the events. The Celebration of 1938, took place in the new Victory Square (Victory Park today) on the left bank side of Rīga, gathering 14 456 singers performing 30 songs, ten of which were folksong adaptations. This festival was covered by 25 journalists from nine countries, with the widest coverage in Estonian, Lithuanian and German media. It was the last Song Celebration before Latvia’s occupation by the Soviet Union in 1940.

1918 – 1939: celebrating Latvianness

Latvia was founded in 1918 as a democratic republic, and the first Song Celebration of the independent country took place in 1926, asserting that our self-determination was real at last! It is not surprising that the overall focus was on “Latvianness”. The general euphoria led to swelling numbers of both participants and audience, and caused curiosity among foreigners who came to see the Celebration with their own eyes.

Already then, organisers could not agree on whether to limit the festival repertoire to easy and pleasant songs, or to enrich it with more complex compositions. In the 1930s, to raise the performance level and

1940 – 1989: survival under oppression

WWII and the following 50 years of the Soviet occupation of Latvia caused enormous material, cultural and human losses. The majority of the Latvian society’s elite and upper-middle class were eliminated in mass killings and deportations, while the rest fled the country or were forced to live a life of humiliation under Soviet rule. These processes, followed by massive russification of the country, significantly damaged the nation’s self-esteem.

The Soviets did not dare abolish the Song Celebration altogether, so they used it as a Communistic indoctrination tool, adjusting the repertoire accordingly. In 1948, a dance festival was added to the Song celebration, and new additions to the infrastructure followed, as well as a system for regular celebrations was introduced.

To fulfil Lenin’s idea that art belonged to the people, participation in amateur culture groups, formed at almost every workplace, became “mandatorily voluntary”. Fortunately, this directive meant financial support for choirs and dance groups, contributing to the preservation of the tradition. As some of the beloved Latvian songs remained in the repertoire, singing them strengthened our sense of identity and unity.

It became a paradox – a festival, which the Soviets thought of as a propaganda tool, and was a form of latent resistance for Latvians.





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The 1980s was a decade of our national reawakening, and the legendary song, *Gaismas pils* (The Castle of Light), became its symbol.

After the joint choir, conducted by Maestro Haralds Mednis, had sung “Gaismas pils” with emotional fervour three times in a row during the 1980 Closing Concert, Soviet authorities banned both the song and the conductor from future participation. During the 1985 closing concert, Maestro Mednis was present as one of the audience, listening to the choir perform the “ideologically correct” repertoire. Nothing suggested something might go astray – the concert ended with official speeches, the flags were lowered, and then the entire choir started calling: “Medni! Medni! Gaismas pili! Gaismas pili!” (demanding Maestro to conduct the song). The audience joined in, and the officials could not do anything. Maestro Mednis ascended the conductors’ tribune and united us in our Song once again.

1990 – today: Recovery and unity

The Soviet empire crashed in 1991, and Latvia was at last free again. In our hearts and minds we already felt liberated in 1990 with the 4 May Declaration of Restoration of Independence, and the Song and Dance Celebration that year was massively adorned with the long-forbidden carmine-white-carmine flag of Latvia, and for the first time since 1940, the national anthem, God Bless Latvia! (Dievs, svētī Latviju!) was sung. It was a moment of euphoria before setting off on the hard work of rebuilding our state in the following decades.

The new millennium marked the turning point in our minds and hearts. During the 2003 Closing concert, people joined in chanting the words of self-assertion inspired by the President, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga’s address. The time had come to release our insecurities, doubts and lack of national self-esteem cultivated in us over 50 years of Soviet oppression.



Ex-President of Latvia, Vaira Vīķe Freiberga (centre), © Edmunds Mickus

In the new millennium, the Celebration is transforming. Some say it is becoming too commercialised (sponsors, vendors, expensive tickets) and losing focus on its original ideals, but others embrace its modernisation.

2018: towards the next 100

In 2018, Latvia celebrates one hundred years since becoming an independent, democratic republic. The XXVI Latvian Song and XVI Dance Celebration is one of the central events of the centenary programme, from 30 June to 8 July, and so far is the most magnificent in terms of the scope and richness of events in its history.

The Celebration lives on as the young Latvians take in the old traditions and transform them into new forms. Today, new apps for smartphones to help people learn the most popular choir songs, folkdance video tutorials and TV programmes exploring the richness of folk costume are only adding to the interest in our cultural heritage. As the main venues of the Celebration are undergoing major reconstruction to host the growing numbers of both participants and spectators, we have no excuse but to continue doing what we do – for a minimum of the next hundred years.

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This is our national pilgrimage. The process of preparation for a period of five years is like a journey, requiring patience and motivation, to reach the destination – the Song and Dance Celebration. The festival is an experience, which leaps out of the framework of ordinary life and brings spiritual transformation through emotional ecstasy. During the festival, we leave the comforts of our everyday lives behind to test our resilience, to be rewarded with new friendships and strengthen old ones, to gain confidence in our abilities and receive an enormous charge of positive energy. Upon returning home, we are physically and emotionally exhausted, but in our hearts each of us has become a better person, at least for a while. The Celebration is like fuel, and when its positive effect runs low, we start looking forward to the next one.