

## The Institutionalisation of Participatory Singing since the 1960s in Estonia

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Previous research into the social structure of participatory singing indicates its decline within modern society (e.g. Blacking, 1973; Turino, 2008). The present study focuses on processes in amateur singing in Estonia using the “Music in my Life” questionnaire (2022). The results show the dynamics of contemporary participatory singing, which can be characterised as institutionalisation within the context of modern society.

▪ **Keywords:** ethnomusicology, vernacular music, music in everyday life, social structure of music, joint singing

Dosedanje raziskave družbene strukture participativnega petja kažejo na njegov zaton v sodobni družbi (npr. Blacking, 1973; Turino, 2008). Pričujoča študija se osredinja na procese v ljubiteljskem petju v Estoniji z uporabo vprašalnika Music in my Life (2022). Rezultati kažejo dinamiko sodobnega participativnega petja, ki jo lahko v okviru sodobne družbe označimo kot institucionalizacijo.

▪ **Ključne besede:** etnomuzikologija, vernakularna glasba, glasba v vsakdanjem življenju, družbena struktura glasbe, skupno petje

### Introduction

Singing exists as a diverse set of practices, from entirely communal singing to various concert settings or even solitary humming. According to a growing body of evidence, group singing or playing instruments together offers a wide range of benefits for its participants, but despite this the practice seems to be diminishing among Western people, who prefer to leave music-making to professionals (Turino, 2008; Kokotsaki, Hallum, 2011; Camlin et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2020; Spitzer, 2021). Participatory music-making began to receive attention from ethnomusicologists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Blacking, 1973), challenging the prevailing narrative of Western music as an aspect of progress while highlighting the value of traditional cultural practices.<sup>1</sup>

Given that many folk song styles, including Estonia’s historical *regilaul* (runosong), assume a participatory nature, a question emerges: does communal singing disappear or transform after the decline of older folk song practices? I especially wonder if any alleged truths about singing habits in Western society are valid in my own country of Estonia, and whether our region can be described as ‘Western’ with respect to participatory music discourse. Estonia’s location in the Northeastern corner of Europe and

<sup>1</sup> Comparative musicology, which emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasised the aesthetic and cognitive value of traditional music.

its post-socialist status make it ambivalent in the binary division of the world that was already considered too “harsh, evolutionary and naïvely optimistic” in the 1950s and 60s (Galland et al., 2008). However, this dichotomy has influenced ethnomusicology, a field which historically has been focused primarily on non-Western music by and for Western researchers. Writing about the lack of participatory singing in the Western world, Turino (2008) references “middle-class Euro-Americans” who grew up in the 1950s and 60s and did not experience music-making at home.<sup>2</sup> Slobin defines the West as “Euro-America”; notably including “the former USSR as part of Gorbachev’s European home” and admits that “ethnomusicology has been less attracted to this region than to Asia, Africa, and Latin America” (Slobin, 1992: 4). Ethnomusicologists are trying to expand the field of their research (e.g. Witzleben, 1997; Blum, 2023), and the present article adds to the diversification of viewpoints.

Estonians prefer to identify themselves as Nordic and Finno-Ugric people, neither East nor West, while their geographic setting in Eastern Europe is not always perceived as an essential feature of local identity construction, but at times as an unfortunate reality.<sup>3</sup> To become a modern European nation was a dream for Estonians, after centuries of living as an ethnic minority without human rights under various foreign rulers and local landlords, mostly of Baltic German origin. Estonia was conquered in 1227 and governed by different states until 1710, when it became part of the Russian Empire. This serfdom was abolished, with reforms taking place in 1816, 1819, and 1868. The Estonian national awakening began during the 1860s, and thus the early 1900s brought the slogan “Let us become Europeans, but remain Estonians!” This slogan, which may seem paradoxical from a people geographically living within Europe, was a call to modernise while preserving their own unique language and culture.

This aspiration was fulfilled after establishing the Estonian Republic in 1918 and achieving victory in the War of Independence in 1920. Such a hard won European/Estonian identity might have been questioned during the years of Soviet occupation after 1940, but it was reinforced once more after the regaining of Estonia’s independence in 1991 and its joining with the EU in 2004.

The present article analyses the social structure of amateur (including vernacular, folk, grassroots) singing in Estonia over the last sixty years. This time frame was chosen because it marked the beginning of a relatively stable period after the disruptions of WW2, Stalinism, and mass deportations (1944–1953) as well as the beginning of an extensive folk music revival movement during the 1960s.

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<sup>2</sup> Turino (2008) does not rely on special research into Western vernacular music. From his work it also appears that in North America there existed communal singing in church and around the fire, as well in some religious or ethnic communities.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s the Johanson brothers wrote and performed the song *Hey boys! Are you ready?* which describes how Estonians actually sail their land away from the Soviet Union.

In order to describe the social structure of music, Thomas Turino's (2008) basic terms *participatory* and *presentational* singing, which distinguish between singing within the group for the singers' own sake and public presentation in front of an audience, are used. The participatory singing tradition in its entirety, which includes open form, co-creation, etc., belongs genuinely to oral music tradition; however, many aspects of participatory music are attainable in other fields of music, e.g. free jazz, choral singing, etc.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, following the Industrial Revolution, traditional ways of participatory singing in modernising countries began to decline. However, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century movements like *participatory art* and *community music* emerged. This interest was influenced by folk and traditional culture, giving rise to a cultural trend aimed at involving the audience in the pursuit of artistic innovation, marketing sensory and physical experiences, and contributing to social and personal wellbeing (Veblen, 2007; Yi, Kim, 2023).

The hypothesis of this article is that modernisation in Estonia has altered the social organisation of participatory singing, leading to its partial institutionalisation. This means that singing together, which used to belong to the private and community sphere and was taken up spontaneously or within the framework of traditional customs, has partly shifted to the public and commercial sphere of society. Group singing and sing-along events are arranged by cultural institutions, media, business enterprises and non-profit organisations, and so their financial needs are supported by the respective funds or regulated by market laws. This process reflects the changes in society, as well as in the conceptions according to which singing within an official group or public event became valued.

In this context, the term *institution* refers to “an organisation that exists to serve a public purpose such as education, or support for people who need help” (CD, 2023). Additionally, *institution* encompasses a broader concept of the formal and informal rules that organise social, political, and economic relations, and which can, in practice, combine with each other (Carter, 2014: 6).

The present article raises the question: what is the state of participatory singing among Estonians – who started to identify proudly as “a singing people” in the 1860s, and rushed through modernisation during the last century – today? (Some earlier insights: Vissel, 2004; Särg, 2009, 2014; Raudsepp, Vikat, 2011). The article begins by addressing the theoretical aspect of the social structure of singing, followed by the introduction of the research methodology, and an analysis of the manifestations of participatory singing in Estonia. Although these processes are examined through the lens of one small nation, the aim is also to bring out their international background and show how they represent more general trends. Beyond academic goals, I also hope to inspire readers to find their own way to participatory singing.

## The social setting of singing

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became apparent from the growing knowledge of various music cultures that the social organisation of singing is an integral part of the music system (Lomax, 1962; Merriam, 1964). The social structure of music is related to several central concepts such as the musical/non-musical, necessity/non-necessity of music-making for humans, and the authentic/non-authentic music style of a culture etc.

Traditional music and language, along with peoples' cognitive and social musical conventions, developed as a result of intercommunication within a group. It seems that the process of making music may be a genuine and necessary human activity and that everyone is musical enough to do this (Blacking, 1973; Cross, 2012; Clayton, 2016). However, the opposite opinion is widespread: that it is sufficient for people to merely listen to great music. For example, Professor Jere Humphreys claimed that if you include the activity of listening, people are still actively engaged with music – and indeed, singing is not for everyone (Russell, 2011). The same opinion was expressed in a discussion that took place in Estonia during the summer of 2022 (Särg, 2022).

Researchers have highlighted several reasons why participatory singing has decreased: the lack of contemporary tradition; the eclecticism of styles and a musical glut fostered by the music industry; the scarcity of suitable repertoire and singing opportunities; the problems of music education, and the feeling of being non-musical; the stigma of amateurism (Turino, 2008; Russell, 2011; Spitzer, 2021: 21). I have outlined the historical processes contributing to the decline of participatory singing in European culture, up to where doubts arose about its necessity and human musicality, as follows:

1. the development of Western music into an elitist art form that demanded attentive listening, the aesthetics of which became a universal criterion of musical value;
2. the modernisation of society after the Industrial Revolution, and the subsequent development of music recording and distribution; urbanisation and disintegration of earlier communities; emergence of consumer society and commercialization of music;
3. a decline in the prestige of oral folk music owing to its being seen as the music of socially lower and “backward” groups, often associated with physical activities, such as working or dancing (see Bohlman, 1988; Slobin, 1992; Baumann, 1996; Inglehart, Welzel, 2007; Thacker, 2012; McCarthy, Goble, 2023 [2011]).

The ideological background of these processes was the belief in human progress, where technological innovation was linked with cultural development, and underdevelopment was seen as a consequence of a people's inherent characteristics, especially its traditional psychological and cultural traits. The Romantics idealised folk culture, but without adopting the oral tradition of folk songs. Against such a background, Blacking's (1973) notions of the lost values of joint music-making influenced both musical study and practice. Slobin echoed Blacking's idea: “Everyone can sing something sometimes. In that sense, there are folk singers everywhere” (1993: 21).

The movements of revitalising folk music emerged in waves after the 19<sup>th</sup> century and encompassed wider social aspects as well (Hill, Bithell, 2014; Livingston, 2014). There were even some attempts to revive the participatory practices, e.g. in Germany the *Wandervögel* (Migratory Birds) movement started in 1896, in which young people went to the countryside with folk songs and dances (Bröcker, 1996). But it became more common to perform arranged folk songs for audiences as presentational music in revival. Enhancing the prestige of traditional music and the self-esteem of the singers themselves became possible by incorporating elements of modern music – arrangements, performing on a stage etc.

A second wave of the folklore movement emerged in the 1960s, when a new generation of urban individuals discovered folk music alongside rock and other contemporary music styles. Folk music was imitated or fused with rock music for performing to audiences, as well as informally cultivated among young people, whose keywords were “active, living participation” (Ronström, 1998: 40). Staged folklore became the accepted branch of performing arts (Honko, 1990; Hill, Bithell, 2014).

The followers of authentic folk music continued to hold on to the idea of the live folk song presentation as open for participation. In order to protect still vibrant folk song traditions, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage was initiated under the aegis of UNESCO in 2003. The generation that took part in the revival of the 1950s and 60s aspired to performances on a professional level, but also fostered collective music-making events, such as workshops, jam sessions, or special events like the Natural Voice Camp (Ronström, 1998; Bithell, 2014).

Examples of organised sing-alongs outside the discourse of folklore come from the US. The TV series *Sing Along* began there in 1958 and invited audience participation, providing the lyrics to the songs (IMdB). The importance of participatory singing to contemporary people became known when the discussion on the decline of group singing in the US had a strong social response; it was considered an “illness” and compared with the silence of the birdsong.<sup>4</sup> To revive participatory singing, the campaign Get America Singing... Again! was launched in 1995 (Schmid, 1995; Russell, 2011: 4). Russell argues that lamentation of the loss of singing in America arose from the “tension between the musical culture we have and the one certain people think we should have” (Russell, 2011: 78).

Camlin et al. (2020) shows that singing together has a variety of benefits on a person’s wellbeing, emotional regulation, and physical health as well as interpersonal effects. The authors conclude that “group singing might be taken – both literally and figuratively – as a potent form of the ‘healthy public’, creating an ‘ideal’ community, which participants can subsequently mobilise as a positive resource for everyday life” (ibid.). However, the kinds of problems and negative consequences that may arise due to exclusion from singing or playing music have not been studied to the same extent.

<sup>4</sup> The concern about birds was expressed in Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* (1962).

## Terms and method

According to Turino’s (2008) classification of the social organisation of music, there are four main categories:<sup>5</sup>

1. participatory music, where everyone takes an active part;
2. presentational music, with the performers and the audience clearly separated;
3. a high-fidelity recording of a live performance;
4. music recorded in a studio.

By the term “participatory music”, Turino does not mean simply singing or playing music together, but more specifically musical activity where participation is valued and integral to the performance. He characterised it by the following features:

1. everybody is expected to take part according to their ability;
2. the blurred or non-existent distinction between artists and audience;
3. open forms – the piece is recreated at every performance from short structural parts and can be prolonged and repeated;
4. loose “feathered” beginnings and endings, in which the participants might join or leave gradually;
5. much repetition, improvisation and variation within predictable structures;
6. game-like practice – what happens musically depends on individual contributions in the moment;
7. dense textures and timbres, partly the result of approximate tuning and timing.

Turino (2008: 47–48) distinguishes between simultaneous and sequential participation, to involve situations where everybody takes a solo in turn (cf. Thacker, 2012). The actual singing situations might be different however, for example in the case of group singing that always has a participatory aspect for singers (cf. Klusen, 1986 [1967]).

European folk song researchers have labelled analogical distinctions between the “primary function” or “first life” of songs, and their “secondary function” or “second life” (Wiora, 1959; Klusen, 1986 [1967]; Honko, 1990; see Table 1). Although performing to the audience is not obligatory for revived folk songs, in practice the second life was mostly presentational; and this very change in song function was considered a feature of “revival” (Hill, Bithell, 2014).

Table 1: Terms describing the social structure of music.

Klusen	Wiora, Honko	Graves, Turino
songs in primary function	first life of folk songs	participatory music
songs in secondary function	second life of folk songs	presentational music

<sup>5</sup> Turino (2008) adapted his central terms from Keil (1987) and Graves (2005).

The rise of interrelated questions about people's involvement in music, their musicality and the impact of music, instigated inquiries into daily musical practices. Mostly people's listening habits were explored, but sometimes the questions were set more widely, such as "What is music about for you?" (Crafts et al., 1993; DeNora, 2000; North et al., 2004; Reyes, 2009; Sloboda, 2010). There were also arranged experiments on the impact of music-making (Bithell, 2014; Woody et al., 2019). The questionnaires about "the meaning of music in Finnish life" were organised in 1994 and 1995 by The Finnish Literary Society (SKS).



Figure 1: The two sides of the flyer for the questionnaire "Music in my Life" in 2022. Designed by Pille Niin.

Given my background as an ethnic Estonian, I was interested in the joint singing of our people. However, as participatory singing might not exist today with all the characteristics described by Turino, I defined it for the present research as singing together outside of professional activities.

The present study utilizes qualitative research, which involved gathering information through the questionnaire, organising the responses into meaningful units, and drawing conclusions (see Flick, 2007 [1999]). As there was a more extensive interest into the personal relationship of Estonians with music among my colleagues, in 2022 the “Music in my Life” collection was organised by the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum in cooperation with the Estonian Folk Music Centre (Fig. 1).

The 49 questions, divided into 10 sets, were created by the ethnomusicologists Janika Oras and Helen Kõmmus, the student of linguistics Margit Kooser, and the author of the article. The groups of questions were prepared mostly according to life stages, but there were also two sets about making music together, e.g. “In what situations do people start to sing and/or play music together [...]?” (Kratt). The campaign was successful and produced approximately 300 writings with various appendices.

A contract was signed with all the respondents, in which they indicated whether they would agree to the publication of their contribution and the use of their names. In the present article, the longer written entries are treated as artefacts that deserve to be credited with the author’s name (unless there are contractual restrictions on publication), but in the short text samples only the writer’s gender, age, and the time of the occasion were indicated. All the original works are found in the Estonian Literary Museum’s online repository Kivike, the project *Muusika minu elus*, 2022 (KIVIKE).

As the campaign was finished only on 21 April 2023, it is not yet possible to give a thorough analysis of the extensive and varied material. The respondents involved a greater share of younger people (90 respondents born before, and 200 after the midpoint in 1966), but the older respondents’ contributions were more comprehensive. Although we had encouraged everybody to take part, there were many people whose musical interests and experiences were above average. A balanced representative sample of 38 respondents of various social backgrounds, musical experiences, and ages – ranging from around 12 to 100 years – was drawn up for further research.

Information about participatory singing was grouped into relevant topics and ordered on a timeline to discover any possible changes. The year of the activity was not always precisely determined, but usually the period was mentioned. When making conclusions, the subjectivity of the answers was considered and thus sweeping generalisations avoided.

## The trends and spheres of participatory singing in Estonia

The ancient Estonian folk song *regilaul* has a participatory structure in which the leader's lines are repeated by other singers. However, since the 1800s, newer folk songs, choral singing and Western art music have gradually displaced *regilaul*, except in the border areas of Setomaa and the Kihnu Island. Many intellectuals tended to treat amateur choral singing as a new form of participatory singing, although its style is more complex, and amateur choirs (*koor*)<sup>6</sup> typically have a professional conductor and mostly sing secular multipart songs written for performance by composers. In 1912 the pedagogue Märt Raud raised a question: what should Estonians sing together when *regilaul* was considered too outdated, the newer end-rhymed songs aesthetically too poor, and choral songs too difficult (Särg, 2012: 125). To address this question, and to discover the ways of participatory singing, a sample of “Music in my Life” submissions was analysed against the following topics: singing in the private sphere, in formal groups, at public events; technological innovations, and perceived changes.

**1. The singing tradition in the private sphere** has proven to be relatively stable (Rüütel, Kuutma, 1996–1997; Vissel, 2004). Strong family and community ties have helped to preserve the unbroken singing tradition (Särg, Oras, 2021). Our research shows the continuation of joint singing in families, although with declining frequency.

a) Singing in childhood with family members is frequently described: “*At home, we made music with our family [...], and we sang a lot of children’s songs. [...] Mother had a beautiful soprano voice, and she also led the singing*” (1950–60s, F, 76). “[E]very evening father came to our bedroom with a guitar and instead of reading a fairy tale, he played the guitar and we sang together” (1950–60s, M, 43). Sometimes it happened that the young musician’s “*co-singer was a dog*”, when they were alone at home (1920–30s, M, 100). In religious families, church songs continued to be sung throughout the Soviet era despite the government’s disdain for religion: “*At home, mother and father sang chorals and taught us children’s songs*” (1950s, F, 76). However, some families did not engage in singing: “*We didn’t sing much at home. [...] At grandma’s and grandpa’s in Hiiumaa, a prayer hour was held, and there they sang religious songs together with the spiritual sisters*” (1950s, F, 70).

From the 1950s to the turn of the century, early childhood memories of singing have become more associated with kindergarten: “*All my first experiences of music, singing, playing during my childhood were in kindergarten, because I started there in the nursery group*” (2000s, F, 20). However, singing remained in homes that had a stronger musical tradition. Two music students who grew up in the 2000s recall: “*My brother and I have only sung together in the meantime, we haven’t done much else*”

<sup>6</sup> In English, but not in Estonian, a distinction is often made between ‘choir’ and ‘chorus’: “an ecclesiastical body of singers is invariably called a choir, as is a small, highly trained or professional group; ‘chorus’ is generally preferred for large groups of secular provenance” (Smith, Percy, 2001).

(F, 20); *“My first vivid memories of listening to music are related to simple songs and accompanying movements. [...] I remember how at first my mother sang them alone, later my mother with my sister and finally all of us together”* (F, 22).

b) In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the various celebrations and activities with singing (holidays, handicrafts) occurred in the local village community. *“Much was also sung on the village’s ‘big swing’ in youth, it was a two-sided swing”* (1930s, F, 82).

With the growth of urbanisation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the assemblies moved from the village community to a more personal circle as well as to formal membership groups. The main events mentioned in the questionnaires that included singing with family and friends were: birthdays, weddings, funerals, Christmas, Martinmas Eve (10 November), St. Catherine’s Eve (24 November), as well as Easter, *guljanje* (Russian for ‘walking’), singing on a swing, the camp party, Mother’s Day, after work bees (Est. *talgud*), singing in the sauna, barbeque evenings etc. (Fig. 2) As one respondent noted: *“In our family, music was a part of all gatherings”* (1960–70s, F, 61). The best-known song ritual was and still is singing to the birthday child. Celebrating Christmas with singing at home endured throughout the Soviet era and was also part of people’s mental resistance to the occupation. Singing at weddings is described less frequently, probably because a band would usually be invited to play dance music; however if a folk musician performed it might be different: *“There was singing at our wedding. We got married in 1974 in Ranna park in Kärdla. The MC<sup>7</sup> was the*



Figure 2: Martinmas in Estonia in the 2000s. Source: ERA, DF 42252.

<sup>7</sup> Master of Ceremonies. Estonian term *pulmaisa* or *pulmavanem* or “wedding father” goes back to the groom’s older male relative.



Figure 3: A songbook for a golden wedding. Sildoja family, 2019. Source: ERA, EFA, AK 1343.

*accordionist and the crowd sang along with him. There were folk songs and obligatory songs at weddings*” (F, 70). Emotional singing was also a part of funeral gatherings: “*I remember the evening of my mother’s wake at our home. [...] the villagers sang, our family as well. I remember, when the neighbour woman [...] was departing, she said with tears in her eyes: ‘It was a nice funeral. Sing as nicely at my funeral, too’*” (1984, F, 82). The repertoire and style of informal singing usually contained newer folk and popular songs, and in some areas even old *regilaul*. Ritual songs and mumming on St. Martin’s Day and St. Catherine’s Day continue, but because of the gradual decline of this custom the Estonian Folklore Council has begun promoting it, too.

There are signs of modernisation in private musical activities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century people started to use handwritten personal songbooks, or the songbooks compiled for special events: weddings, funerals etc. (Fig. 3) During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, professional MCs were hired for weddings, who would also organise group singing. Among our respondents was Henno Sepp (b. 1922), a popular MC, folk musician and organiser of sing-along events. He has led 614 weddings since 1958 and completed the MC course at the Folk University. Amongst the materials of the Estonian Folklore Archives there is an example of a family gathering structured like a song festival with a procession and concert, followed by a bonfire with participatory singing (ERA, EV 397). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century formal ensembles were sometimes organised around large musical families, a church organist for example established an ecclesiastic children’s ensemble when she became a mother (1997, F, 51).

**2. Singing inside (semi)formal groups, such as school classes, societies, and music collectives takes place** as part of their regular activities, and their more informal social life.

The development of joint singing skills through education and the establishment of school choirs started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is in principle continued today (Raudsepp, Vikat, 2011). Social processes and ideologies were reflected in school: *“The thing about elementary school singing is that it was taught in the singing lesson as being patriotic, but there were still dance games”* (1940–50s, F, 82). In the 1950s, the boys of the last secondary school class in Tallinn secretly celebrated Christmas by lighting candles and humming the song *Holy Night* (M, 86).

Society seemed to have expectations about children’s singing that teachers had to take into account. One teacher is remembered for enthusiastically organising singing during the music lessons, while she closed the classroom windows (1960s, F, 70). The ability to hold a tune was seen as inborn, and teaching it was considered quite a feat: *“Teacher Valdma was able to teach even those students who could not hold a tune before meeting with her to sing”* (1963, F, 70). In the questionnaire, several people answered that singing together was the nice part of school music lessons (e.g. M, 86, 1940s; F, 20, 2000s). A teacher with a background in traditional music wrote: *“It would be necessary to change the myth that music is for the few chosen ones - it is everyone’s right”* (F, 49).

Estonian schoolchildren and students had a lively singing tradition in their working brigades in the 1960s–1980s (M, 77). An organiser of group singing, Jaagup Kippar (1993), confirmed based on his own memories that teenagers sang together in the 1990s. The student societies of Tartu University hold closed participatory singing events, a tradition which dates back to German students’ fraternities. I asked Kadri Vider, Magister Cantandi of the female society Indla: *“In Indla, what is done with the people who can’t sing?”* She replied that everyone learns to sing there (2022).

The number of registered folk singers/musicians in Estonia is 2,200, while there are 35,522 amateur choir singers in a population of only some 1.3 million people (Statistikaamet). The amateur collectives are established for presentational music, but more time is given to the rehearsals which actually resemble singing for the group’s own sake. A singer of a female choir stated:

*The emotions we get from the choir are important for our health. If at home, now and then it hurts here and there, or there is some unfortunate illness going on, then during the singing rehearsal everything is forgotten and it’s as if there are no problems. Also at all the choir events, old age is forgotten and passports are not checked.* (2022, F, 76)

Informal singing thrives in musical groups or where their members take part, because they have skill and a repertoire. An experienced vinyl DJ and leader of singing events stated:

*Singing unites people – in my experience – I would even say that people want to relive what filled the evenings of parties or communities of their youth. Similar gatherings are coming up in the next months – I’m positive that a significant part of the time will be spent singing together. Achieving this gives the participants something to be proud of. The elderly feel their responsibility in keeping the custom of singing together alive – it’s part of our nation’s culture. (2022, Valter Parve, 77)*

**3. Participatory singing at public events**, such as workshops, festivals; and various rituals.

a) The “authentic” folklore movement started in Estonia in the 1960s and contributed to the national identity in opposition to the official Soviet folklore performances, which were infused with socialist ideology. Folklore groups performed on stage, but also organised singing along at concerts and participated in village festivals which helped traditions survive (cf. Kuutma, 1998; Kalkun, Oras, 2018). A member of a rural folklore group said: “[W]e held concerts titled ‘Back Home with Folklore’ every summer in the villages of the Muhu Island. There, the line between performers and listeners often disappeared” (2000s, F, 82).

The composer Veljo Tormis initiated the tradition of participatory singing of *regilaul* with audiences in the 1960s. Together with folklorist Ülo Tedre, he published the special songbook *Regilaulik* (Tedre, Tormis, 1975).

During the revival movement, new organisational structures evolved, and in 1988 the Estonian Folklore Society was founded. When Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had re-established their independence in 1991, they were given full membership at CIOFF with the rights of a national section. To represent the Estonian Republic in the CIOFF, the Estonian Folklore Council was established in 1992.

In 1991, the teaching of traditional music began in the Viljandi Culture College and in 2007, at the Academy of Music and Theatre. The students of traditional music are praised for contributing to social life: “*When celebrating with students of traditional music, singing together and playing instruments is one of the mandatory parts of the party*” (2020s, M, 25).

The Viljandi Folk Music Festival (established 1993) started to organise workshops of various singing styles, as well as a “Regilaul nest” (*Regilaulupesa*) where participants can sing along with the experienced leaders. A similar monthly singing event “Regilaul room” (*Regilaulutuba*) has been organised in Tartu museums since the 2000s. In 2005 was established the Society of Archaic Male Singing whose aim is to organise both participatory singing evenings and concerts.

At a participatory singing event, a free atmosphere is created: people are sitting in a circle outdoors on the lawn or in a cosy room; or they are playing dance games. If possible, they are offered drinks and snacks and never discuss the “artistic quality” of singing.

b) Congregational singing is the common practice of the Lutheran Church but has diminished after persecution during the Soviet era. In the 1940s and 50s, spiritual gatherings and singing might be held under the guise of birthdays (F, 76). A funeral from the same period was described as follows: *“I didn’t go to church as a child - firstly, the Kanepi church was far away and secondly - it was forbidden. However, I always sang along when there was a funeral and the priest was there. [...] Later this [deceased] Juuli’s nephew was amazed at my courage to participate. As an employee of the local party committee, he was hiding behind the corner”* (1940–50s, F, 80).

Today, there is not much singing in church, because there are only around 30,000 active members (Viilma, 2019; Zöbin, 2021) and many of those do not join in the singing. *“In the church at Christmas time and at the cemetery day, the priest sings mainly alone, accompanied by a few timid voices”* (2010–20s, F, 71). Some larger city congregations still have good singing skills and choirs.

The Lutheran Church has started a new institutional use for *regilaul* as congregational singing and includes some *regilaul* songs, adapted as needed, to the spiritual theme, in the new evangelical church hymnal.

c) Various public occasions are organised for participatory singing. In the TV-show “Sing Along” during the early 2000s, singer Reet Linna organised events all over Estonia, and encouraged people to sing: *“Doing a TV show together, it’s not a concert!”* (Suitso, 2003). With the New Age ideology, the participatory singing of “power songs” began, sometimes including *regilaul*. Various people organised sing-along events for a fee, offering also a spiritual experience. *“It had a particularly powerful and tension-relieving effect together with the movements,”* wrote a participant in Tom Valsberg’s “Power Songs” (2020s, F, 74). Valsberg advertises the singing evenings online: *“The ticket includes a good vibe, hugs and a cup of ceremonial cocoa, which will increase your happy hormones and give you euphoric energy for several hours!”* (Wäelaulud).

Among our respondents were two skilled leaders of sing-along events: Henno Sepp, an accordionist who has organised gatherings of village musicians since 1984 (Fig. 5), and Valter Parve, a DJ for vinyl records. The latter coordinated various events including group singing: e.g. the celebration of the 390th anniversary of Tartu University.

**4. The performance of a singing collective** has a participatory facet for singers, and can take on an additional participatory aspect when the audience joins in, or when performers switch to spontaneous singing without leaving the stage. This happens more easily in less regulated situations, for example after the end of the concert program.

a) The Choral Song Festivals began in Tartu, Estonia in 1869 and they played an important role in the nation’s cultural and economic self-determination. The Song Festivals continued, (with a break during WW2), and have been held normally every five years until today. The chorus of up to 30,000 people performs to the audience on the Tallinn Song Festival Ground. But in addition to that, it forms a special singers’ community, where sometimes the audience becomes “merged” with the chorus. At the

most recent song festival in 2019 special songs were added for participatory singing, including a *regilaul* adaptation. Almost all respondents had vivid memories of the song festivals. One boy wrote: “*I sing only in music lessons because the teacher makes me,*” and added: “*After attending the Song Festival I have thought, probably, to start singing, too*” (2020s, M, 14).

The mood of the Singing Revolution began to develop at the festivals. When one of the Song Festival concerts in 1960 was cancelled due to heavy rain, choirs remained on the stage, singing songs that “put the organisers of the festival in trouble” (LTP). The end of this festival was particularly memorable as a joint choir of more than 10,000 people refused to leave the stage because the final song was banned. One of the leaders of the Singing Revolution, the artist Heinz Valk, then a member of a student choir, wrote (Fig. 4):

*It was the Estonian Song Festival in 1960. The Communist Party had prohibited to sing ‘My Fatherland is my Love’ by Gustav Ernesaks.<sup>8</sup> For what reason were we gathered there at all, then? The festival without this song would be a shame on us before all the Estonian people.*

*The culmination arrived. The obligatory Soviet songs had been performed and there were no more songs in the concert program, but the joint choirs refused to leave the stage even when told to do so several times.*

*The movement coordinator of the choir was shaking hands in front of the stage and kept repeating: ‘Start moving now! Front rows first. Quiet, no rush! Fine, let’s go! Concert is over. Let’s go! Let’s go!’*

*The joint choirs were buzzing ever louder and the same could be heard from the square. Baffled conductors were standing there, looking around as though they were waiting for someone to come or something to happen. Tension kept rising. Some officials were running back and forth in front of the stage, giving orders to the conductors who still lingered. The movement coordinator kept repeating: ‘Let’s go! Let’s go! Start moving!’*

*Then, high voices came from the women’s choirs: ‘Song! Song! Song!’ There was the excited [conductor] Gustav Ernesaks standing next to the rostrum wearing an oak wreath and looking at the singers. Officials were already panicking before the stage. Also people in the rows of VIP’s stood up, glancing behind and at the stage with scared faces.*

*Ever louder demand: ‘Song! Song! Song!’ was exclaimed by the singers. The tension in the air was electric, palpable, as if something should erupt at any moment.*

<sup>8</sup> Lyrics by Lydia Koidula (1843–1886). Gustav Ernesaks (1908–1993) is an Estonian composer and conductor.

*And then it began. I can no longer recall which voice group launched the first syllable: 'My...' Thereafter it started rolling like an avalanche. [...]*

*We had been singing without the conductor already a half of the first stanza when the ideological secretary, Leonid Lentsmann from the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, ran to Gustav Ernesaks and shouted at him in a loud voice that could be heard by the singers: 'What are you still doing here! Get up to conduct!' Ernesaks rushed up the staircase with quick steps, caught exactly the right phrase and started conducting us with already familiar movements.*

*People on the whole square were standing up. Singers had taken off their black and white college caps. The public was singing along. We were all like in a trance. [...] The only clue to reality was the warmth of tears on our cheeks. There was a cosmic power filling the whole square and probably all Estonia at that moment.*

*As the song ended, Gustav Ernesaks waved finally and covered his face with his hands. We saw him cry. Was it out of joy? Or out of pride he had made such a marvellous song for his people, who deserved it and proved it. (2022, Heinz Valk, 86).*

At the end of the 1980s, a new wave of singing events arose: the Singing Revolution, where in Heinz Valk's words, we fought by "singing, laughing, and dancing" (2022).

Participatory singing has also taken place in the context of recent social events, such as the Forest War, which escalated in 2018 and brought about the Forest Song Festival. This is a singing of *regilaul* on the small swamp island of Hüpassaare, Viljandi county, to highlight ecological problems.

### **5. The influence of technological means and perceived changes in tradition.**

These themes run through almost all the writings, and technology-mediated music acts both as a substitute, effective teacher or leader for sing-alongs: it has a loud voice and knows the words and the tune. Estonian Broadcast already promoted joint singing in the 1930s (Raudsepp, Vikat, 2011), but in my sample the first memory of learning a song from the radio was in the 1950s (F, 71). In the 1960s TV began to arrive and the song programs *Horoscope* and *Entel-Tentel* especially became popular. "*My relatives even say that I sang before I learned to speak. This is partially confirmed by a clip from a home video where I dance and sing [lälisen, lit. 'babble'] along to Entel-Tentel's songs*" (2000s, F, 22).

Singing on the road was replaced by singing in the car or on the bus. (Fig. 5) Many submissions described listening and singing together to audio cassettes or CDs during car journeys with the family (2000s, e.g. F, 49; M, 25). Young people sing along to music in their headphones (2022, F, 22). Karaoke is rarely mentioned.

23 oli 1960. a. üldlaulupidu. Kompartei oli keel-  
 nud laulda Ernesaksa „Mu isamaa on minu arm.“  
 Kuid milleks me siis üldse laulupeole tulime? Tule-  
 selle lauluta me oleks end häbisest saanud terve  
 Eesti rahva ees.

Ja siis oligi kulminatsioon käes. Kohustuslikud  
 nõukogulised laulud olid lauldud, kontserdiravas  
 rohkem laule enam polnud, ent ühendkoorid ei soos-  
 tunud inegi pärsast mitmekondset nõuet laulukaare alt  
 lahkuma.

Laululava ees vehkis kätega kooride liikumise juht  
 ja aina kordas: „Hakake nüüd liikuma! Kõigepealt  
 esinead. Minge rahulikult, ilma trügimiseta! Noh,  
 lähme siis! Kontsert on lõppenud! Lähme! Lähme!“

Ühendkoorid sumisevad aina tugevamalt, sama kos-  
 tus ka väljakuult. Kooride ees seisid nõutud nägudega  
 dirigendid ja vahtisid ümberingi, nagu oodates kellegi  
 tulekut või millegi juhtumist. Rahvas väljakul tõusis  
 püsti. Pinge aina kasvas. Laululava ees sibasid edasi-  
 tagasi mingid ametiisikud, jagades käsku või korraldu-  
 si dirigentidele, kes aga jäid endiselt seisma. Liikumise-  
 juht aina kordas: „Kähe laiali! Lähme laiali! Haka-  
 ke juba liikuma!“

Süü hakkas naiskooride poolt kostuma viljumist:  
 „Laulu! Laulu! Laulu!“ Dirigendipuldi kõrval  
 seisin ärevil näoga Ernesaks, tammepärg kaotas ja vaa-  
 tas ainiti lauljate poole. Ametnaine sebumine lava ees  
 oli juba paanikailmeline. Ka ees olevates VIPide rin-  
 aidades tõusis nüri ja rahulolematu hääle.

Figure 4: Fragment of Heinz Valk's manuscript, where he describes the 1960 Song Festival. 2022. Source: ERA, EFA I 425.



Figure 5: Singing in the bus near Pärnu. Accordionist Henno Sepp. The 2000s. Source: ERA, Foto 19355.

With modern amplification it is possible to hold song festivals with less people on the stage. This has enabled various events to be organised on the Song Festival Ground, including several gatherings that eventually became the Singing Revolution. Singing for Ukraine was organised in 2022 as a huge chorus performing *Oy u luzi Chervona Kalyna* (Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow) in Tallinn, and the event was shared over media.

During the Covid pandemic, a new form of online group singing spread. In 2020 a digital choir of 2,500 people sang “live” at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds on the screens of nearly 1,000 tablets, and over 200,000 people were watching the live stream at their homes or in their cars on location (GVS).

Several of the older respondents point out the decline of the tradition of participatory singing: *“In the past, we used to sing together more on birthdays and Christmas Eve, unfortunately it is fading now, because the grandchildren have a newer repertoire and there are few songs in common, we are now more in terms of listeners”* (2022, F, 76).

Group singing often flounders because people don’t know the words by heart. A sign of new technology are also the photocopied and printed songbooks for family events in recent decades, and finding song lyrics online on the smartphone.

One of the reasons for the decrease in singing along might be the orientation towards performance. *“I think that the culture of preparing for song festivals and the strict requirements of high level performance have greatly reduced the spontaneity of singing. The joy of singing is left completely behind,”* writes a teacher of traditional music (2022, F, 49).

A young lady characterised a typical Estonian relationship to music with a participatory aspect:

*Gatherings of a musical family, maybe just an Estonian family, include making music together. [...] My relationship with music, as so often in Estonians, starts from childhood in choir singing.* (2022, F, 20)

## Conclusion

The institutionalisation of participatory singing is a tendency to give this activity a formal social structure in the context of modern society. The following trends can be drawn over the last half-century in Estonian participatory singing:

1. In the private (family, friends) sphere, informal group singing seems to have been diminished, but is still a well-known activity in childhood and on family occasions.
2. Singing in (semi)formal groups such as school classes, music collectives and societies happens as regular practice in music lessons, rehearsals, camps, and also at informal gatherings.

3. Participatory singing in public happens as part of various rituals (e.g. church service); or it is organised in the course of a folklore or inclusive culture movement (workshop, singing “room”, TV-show etc).
4. Choral (and other group) singing has both participatory and presentational aspects. Song festivals persist since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have given a model to other singing events, such as the gatherings of the Singing Revolution, or Singing for Ukraine. The song festivals often address social and political problems.
5. Technology has likely reduced the occurrence of participatory singing, but has also offered new opportunities, e.g. the emergence of an online singing group during the Covid pandemic. Technology also supports participatory singing with sound amplification and various possibilities to rely on written song texts or sound recordings – however, older people do feel that the tradition of spontaneous participatory singing has diminished.

Much of music-making has become based on formalised groups and societies, and funded through projects or commercial activities. Similarly to the commodification of the musical listening experience, there is offered the experience of participation. Singing has united Estonians during the last half century and helped to preserve national identity and resistance throughout the Soviet era.

Within the framework of the modern narrative of progress based on knowledge and technology, music was also seen as a subject to evolve to a higher level, which is probably why special value was given to written music culture, formal music education, the performance of music as an artefact, as well as the technological means in 20<sup>th</sup> century music. In the early days of modernisation, fast positive changes in society might cause arrogance toward old traditions, but many people have felt that some emotional needs remain unfulfilled, and have established revival activities, as indeed has happened with participatory singing.

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### **Institucionalizacija participativnega petja v Estoniji od 60. let prejšnjega stoletja**

V članku so analizirani procesi v družbeni strukturi ljubiteljskega (ali ljudskega, vernakularnega) petja v Estoniji s poudarkom na njegovih participativnih vidikih. Uporabljena sta osnovna izraza Thomasa Turina (2008) »participativno« in »predstavitveno« petje, ki razločujeta petje v skupini in javno nastopanje. Etnomuzikologi so predlagali, da je proces muziciranja lahko pristna in nujna človeška dejavnost in da je vsakdo dovolj muzikalen, da to počne (Blacking, 1973). Skupinsko petje ponuja udeležencem številne koristi, vendar se kljub temu zdi, da ta praksa med ljudmi na Zahodu usiha (Turino, 2008; Camlin idr. 2020; Spitzer, 2021).

Članek gradi na hipotezi, da je modernizacija v Estoniji spremenila družbeno organizacijo skupinskega petja, kar je privedlo do njegove delne institucionalizacije – težnje, da bi ta dejavnost v sodobni družbi dobila formalno družbeno strukturo. Estonska zgodovinska tradicija participativnega petja je *regilaul*, lokalna veja finskih runskih pesmi (ang. *runosongs*). Pričujoča študija analizira dinamiko tradicije petja na ozadju zgodovinskih procesov modernizacije, razvoja nacionalne identitete in države (1919–1940), sovjetske okupacije in protisovjetskega odpora (1940–1991), folklornega gibanja (začelo se je v 50.–60. letih prejšnjega stoletja) ter ponovne uveljavitve nacionalne neodvisnosti (1991).

S kvalitativno metodo je preučen vzorec gradiva iz zbiralne akcije »Glasba v mojem življenju«, ki jo je leta 2022 organiziral Estonski folklorni arhiv pri Estonskem literarnem muzeju. Rezultati predstavljajo transformacijo tradicije sodelovalnega petja v zasebnem in družbenem življenju v zadnjega pol stoletja:

1. V zasebni (družinski, prijateljski) sferi se zdi, da se je neformalno skupinsko petje zmanjšalo, vendar je še vedno močno v otroštvu in ob družinskih srečanjih.
2. Petje v (pol)formalnih skupinah (npr. šolski razredi, glasbeni kolektivi in društva) se redno izvaja pri pouku glasbe, na vajah, taborih in tudi na neformalnih srečanjih.
3. Sodelovalno petje v javnosti se dogaja kot del različnih obredov (npr. cerkvene liturgije) ali pa je organizirano v folklornem ali inkluzivnem kulturnem gibanju (delavnica, pevska »soba«, televizijska oddaja itn.).
4. Tradicija zborovskega petja ima tako participativni kot prezentacijski vidik. Estonski festivali pesmi se ohranjajo od 19. stoletja in so bili zgled za druge pevске dogodke, kot so srečanja Pevske revolucije, Pojemo za Ukrajino. Pesmi na festivalih navadno obravnavajo družbene in politične probleme.
5. Tehnologija je verjetno zmanjšala pojavnost sodelovalnega petja, vendar je ponudila tudi nove priložnosti, npr. med pandemijo koronavirusa je nastala spletna pevska skupina. Tehnologija podpira sodelovalno petje tudi s krepitvijo in različnimi možnostmi opiranja na pisna besedila pesmi ali zvočne posnetke; kljub novim možnostim starejši menijo, da se je tradicija sodelovalnega petja zmanjšala.

Petje je v zadnjega pol stoletja združevalo Estonce ter pomagalo ohranjati nacionalno identiteto in odpor v času Sovjetske zveze, čeprav je velik del glasbenega ustvarjanja postal osnovan na formaliziranih skupinah in društvih, ki se financirajo prek projektov ali komercialnih dejavnosti. Podobno kot komodifikacija glasbenega poslušanja se ponuja tudi izkušnja sodelovanja. V okviru moderne pripovedi o napredku, ki temelji na znanju in tehnologiji, je tudi glasba veljala za predmet, ki se mora razviti na višjo raven, zato so verjetno posebno vrednost v glasbi 20. stoletja imeli pisna glasbena kultura, formalno glasbeno izobraževanje, izvajanje glasbe kot artefakta in tudi tehnološka sredstva. Na začetku modernizacije bi hitre pozitivne spremembe v družbi lahko povzročile pozabo starih tradicij, vendar so mnogi ljudje začutili, da nekatere čustvene potrebe ostajajo neizpolnjene, in so dejavnosti oživili, kar se je dejansko zgodilo s sodelovalnim petjem.