



Spires dominate the old town in Tallinn, where the Song Festival attracted a third of the country's population

Sing a song of independence

NOEL MALCOLM went to Estonia for the National Song Festival. This year there were no hymns to Lenin, and they sang what they wanted to



National costumes in Estonia: a genuine, continuous tradition

THEY MAY BE good at music, but they don't know much about politics." Mr Gorbachev's remark about the leaders of the Baltic states (one of whom, President Landsbergis of Lithuania, is a professor of musicology) will come back to haunt him one day. The musical life of these three small countries is much closer to the hearts and minds of the people than anything the Communist professional politicians ever managed to create.

Anyone who doubts the power of music should have been in Estonia, the northernmost of the three Baltic states, last weekend. The opening concert of the country's Song Festival, performed at a huge open-air auditorium, was quite simply the biggest national gath-

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ROBERT HARDING



The cupolas and golden crosses of Tallinn

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ering ever held on Estonian soil. The choir consisted of 28,000 singers, and the audience numbered more than 300,000 – altogether, more than a third of the entire native population of Estonia. It was as if a concert in France had been attended by 19 million people.

THESE Song Festivals have always been national events. The first one was held in 1869, at a time when Estonia was still forming its own cultural identity in literature and music. A quiet, industrious people of farmers and peasants, the Estonians had been ruled for centuries by foreigners: first Danes, then Swedes, then Russians. The capital city, Tallinn, had belonged to the German league of 'Hansa' ports, and the German-speaking landowners were descended from the old orders of Teutonic knights.

Today the old part of Tallinn still feels like a Hanseatic town, with its cobbled streets, high-gabled merchants' houses and Gothic churches with their slender spires – a cross between the worlds of Thomas Mann and Hans Christian Andersen. (Whereas the Russian Orthodox cathedral on the citadel of the old town, a profusion of bulging, gold-painted cupolas, looks – as Prince Charles might say – "like a carbuncle on the face of a familiar friend".)

In 1840, according to the English traveller Elizabeth Rigby, an Estonian peasant in Tallinn was as rare a sight as a Highlander in the streets of Edinburgh. But gradually the Estonians moved into the towns and organised a distinctive cultural life of their own. The tradition of choral singing may have been derived partly from their German burghers, but the songs they sang were written by Estonian composers, and performed by choirs dressed in all the finery of their local costumes.

And what costumes! To my jaded eye, there is usually something phoney about "national dress" – in most parts of Europe, at any rate. But in Tallinn during the Song Festival my resistance

was completely overcome, first of all by sheer numbers (half the town seemed to be wearing these costumes) and secondly by the extraordinary variety of colours and garments on display.

The women have long, high-waisted, pleated skirts, bright red or multi-coloured, often with an elaborate lace apron in front; above, they wear embroidered blouses and an inexhaustible variety of caps or bonnets or tall, embroidered head-dresses. Some of the men have swirling ankle-length coats, made of black felt with scarlet trimmings; others wear short sky-blue frock coats with brass buttons at the back, and soft, broad-brimmed top hats – looking for all the world like 18th-century coachmen who have just stepped out of the painting on a Meissen plate.

From the photographs of all the Song Festivals at the Music Museum in Tallinn, it is clear that these costumes belong to a genuine, continuous tradition, not a modern invented one. Even under Communist rule the tradition of the Festivals was allowed to continue – not because the Soviet authorities respected Estonian feelings, but because they thought that in this way national sentiment could be diverted and downgraded into something non-political, something merely cultural and 'folkloric'. They were wrong, of course.

One song, traditionally performed at the end of every Festival, *Mu isamaa on minu arm* ("My homeland, my dearest love") became the unofficial national anthem of the country. In 1969 the authorities banned it from the programme. At the end of the final concert the choir stood, expectantly, refusing to move; then, gradually, both choir and audience began to sing the forbidden words. At the last verse, in a futile attempt to control the damage, the Party bosses told the choirmaster to stand up and conduct it "officially". There is a little parable there for Mr Gorbachev in his dealings with this proud and determined people today.

As negotiations continued in Moscow over the future independence of the Baltic states, this year's Song Festival celebrated the fact that, in spirit at least, Estonia, has already broken irrevocably with its Soviet past. It was the first Festival for 50 years when the

choirs have sung only what they wanted to sing: no hymns to Lenin this time. It was also the first time in half a century that they have flown only the blue, black and white Estonian flag, with not a hammer or a sickle in sight. And it was the first Festival to include people from the émigré Estonian communities in the West: a choir from Canada joined the singers, and in the huge procession which began the Festival there were representatives of the émigrés in Sweden, Canada, the US and Argentina.

Few countries in world history have suffered such a haemorrhage of talent as the Baltic states. From Estonia nearly one third of the population fled abroad during the Second World War, when the country was invaded first by Stalin, then by the Nazis and then by the Russians again. Today the Council of Estonia, the new non-Communist political forum which is challenging the Estonian Supreme Soviet for the right to legislate, actually includes representatives of the émigré population – an arrangement without parallel in any other "East European" country.

AMONG those who escaped during the darkest days of the war was the country's finest composer, Eduard Tubin. Born in 1905, he was a well-known conductor in Estonia and had already written four out of his great series of ten symphonies by the time he left in 1944. He moved to Stockholm, where he got a job preparing the scores of early operas at the Drottningholm Theatre, and continued to write his music in virtual obscurity.

In the 1960s and 70s he was allowed to revisit Estonia, where his music was occasionally played; but his works remained largely unknown in the West until another Estonian, the conductor Neeme Järvi, emigrated in 1980. Järvi conducted the Tenth Symphony in Boston to huge acclaim, and his recordings of Tubin's works on the BIS and Chandos labels have now enabled music-lovers throughout the world to discover for themselves that this little-known Baltic composer was in fact one of the great symphonists of the 20th-century.

For most of the 1980s, Tubin's

works were banned again in the Soviet Union. But last month, as a prelude to the Song Festival, Tallinn staged a special music festival devoted to Tubin's works: a fortnight of concerts, including performances of songs, piano pieces, chamber music, works for string orchestra, two of his symphonies and both his operas. For the first time Estonian music-lovers could begin to discover the full range of his extraordinary talent.

Tubin's music is utterly individual, but his symphonic style might be described as half-way between Sibelius and Shostakovich. The Fifth Symphony, which ended the final orchestral concert of the festival, has all the vigour and drive of Shostakovich at his most powerful, but it also broadens out into passages of polyphonic richness and instrumental inventiveness which are entirely Tubin's own. And the second of his operas, *Barbara von Tisenhusen*, which was given three performances at this Festival, is one of the most extraordinary feats of musical construction in operatic history.

In order to match the sense of tragic inevitability in the plot (which concerns a 16th-century Estonian noblewoman who falls in love with a commoner, tries to elope, is captured by her brothers, condemned to death by a family court of honour and drowned in a hole in the ice), Tubin constructed the entire opera on a single theme of nine notes which runs through the bass-line of the score like a passacaglia or chaconne. But he developed this raw material with infinite inventiveness, filling the opera with music of different genres – a love duet, a trial scene, folksongs, a wedding march, a waltz.

This opera was powerful enough even in the cramped little opera house at Tallinn; given a full-scale performance in one of the great opera houses of the West, it would be a knock-out.

"Do not underestimate our composers and writers," one Estonian musician told me. "They are our memory-bank: our spirit has been stored away there, during the years when it could not be expressed in any other form." Now, at long last, the time has come for Estonia to recover its memories – and for the rest of the world to discover them too.

LAUIGE ISESEISVUSE LAULIJ

Noel Malcolm käis Eestis rahvuslikul laulupeol. Sel aastal ei esitatud hümne Leninile ja nad laulsid seda, mida tahtsid

"Nad võivad teha head muusikat, aga nad ei tea suurt midagi poliitikast." Hr. Gorbatšovi märkus Balti riikide liidrite kohta (kellest üks, Leedu president Landsbergis, on muusikateaduse professor), tuleb talle kunagi valusasti tagasi. Nende kolme väikese maa muusikaelu on nende rahvaste südamele ja meeltele palju lähemal, kui ükskõik mis iganes on kommunistlikel professionaalsetel poliitikutel õnnestunud luua.

Igaüks, kes kahtleb muusika jõus, oleks pidanud olema möödunud nädalavahetusel Eestis — põhjapoolseimas kolmest Balti riigist. Selle maa laulupeo avakontsert, mis esitati tohutus vabaõhudauditooriumis, oli üsna kindlasti suurim rahvuslik kogunemine, mis ial Eestimaa pinnal peetud. Koor koosnes 28 000 lauljast ja publik ulatus arvult üle 300000 — kokku rohkem kui kolmandik kogu Eesti põliselanikkonnast. See on sama hea, kui ühel kontserdil Prantsusmaal oleks olnud 19-miljoniline kuulajaskond.

Taalised laulupeod on alati olnud rahvuslikud sündmused. Esimene peeti 1869. a., ajal, mil Eestis oli oma kultuuriline identiteet kirjanduses ja muusikas alles kujunemas. Rahuliku, tööka talupidajate ja põllumeeste rahvana oli eestlasi sajandeid valitsenud võõramaalased: algul taanlased, siis rootslased, siis venelased. Pealinn Tallinn oli kuulunud sakslaste "Hansa" sadamalinnade ühendusse ja saksa keelt kõnelevad maaomanikud põlvnesid Teutooni rüütlite iidsetest ordudest.

Tallinna vana linnaosa tundub veel tänagi hansalik oma muna-

kivisillutisega tänavate, kõrgeviiluliste kaupmehemajade ja saledate tornidega gooti kirikutega — Thomas Manni ja Hans Christian Anderseni maailmade ristumiskoht. (Kuna aga Vene õigeusu katedraal vanalinna linnusel — punduvate kullakarvaliste tornide üliküllus — näeb välja — nagu ütleks prints Charles — "nagu koeranael armsa sõbra näol".)

Inglise ränduri Elizabeth Rigby andmetel oli eesti talupoeg 1840. aastal Tallinnas sama harv nähtus kui šoti mägismaalane Edinburgh' tänavatel. Aga üha enam kolis eestlasi linna ja organiseerisid oma selgepiirilist kultuurielu. Koorilaulmise traditsioon võis küll osaliselt pärineda nende sakslastest kaaslinlastelt, aga laulud, mida nad laulsid, olid kirjutanud Eesti heliloojad, ja neid esitasid koorid, kes olid rüütatud kohalike rahvariiete täiesse toredusse.

Ja millised kostüümid! "Rahvuslikus riietuses" on minu bla-seerunud silmale harilikult midagi võltsi — enamikus Euroopa osades igal juhul. Aga laulupeo ajal Tallinnas sain ma oma tõrkusest täiesti jagu, eelkõige tänu juba arvulisele küljele (näis nagu kannaks pool linna neid kostüüme) ja teiseks tänu nähaolevale ebaharilikule valikule värvidest ja rõivaist.

Naistel on pikad, kõrge pihaga, volditud seelikud — erepunased või mitmevärvilised, sageli peenelt töödeldud pitsist põllega; peal kannavad nad tikitud pluuse ja ammendamatus valikus mütse või tanusid või kõrgeid, tikitud peakatteid. Mõnedel meestel on lehvivad pahkluuni ulatuvad kued, õmmeldud mustast vildist sarlakpunaste ääristega; teised kannavad lühikesi taevassiniseid saterkuubi vasknõõpidega seljal ja pehmeid laiaäärelisi torukübaraid — nähes välja täpselt nagu 18. sajandi kutsarid, kes on just maha astunud maalingult Meisseni taldrikul.