

JOINT SINGING AS A PHENOMENON OF ESTONIAN CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

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Abstract

The recent decades have been revolutionary in Estonia and in all spheres of life including education, quests and changes have taken place. In the period of globalisation it is the time to find out whether and to what extent Estonia manages to maintain its cultural values and national identity in the process of those dynamic changes. In the Estonian context joint singing can be viewed as a representative of cultural transmission. Joint singing originates from the so-called older folk song, Lutheran hymns and, most recently, powerfully emerged choral singing. Joint singing has developed into an important cultural metaphor of the identity of Estonian nation – song festivals.

The current article focuses on the nature of joint singing and its development in the music education of Estonian comprehensive schools, what was founded by the pedagogue, composer, publicist and researcher Riho Päts in 1930s. The methodological basis of the research is the concept of joint singing, one type of which is choral singing, in the cultural transmission of the new generation of Estonians today. In the study participation of pupils in youth song festivals (1962-2007) is analysed to investigate the tendencies of development of joint singing. The results of the study prove that in contemporary Estonia choral singing is the most powerful type of joint singing and carries a phenomenon of cultural transmission based on innovative-traditional approach in music education.

Key words: joint singing, choral singing, song festival, music education, transmission.

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century in many European countries (Germany, Finland, Norway, Denmark, etc.) people's interest in getting to know and research the national culture of their country could be observed. In Estonia also interpretation of cultural heritage and its influence on the development of national culture increased during that period. Oskar Loorits, a well-known Estonian historian of culture has expressed an important thought about the future: human culture is pursuing increasingly greater difference in its individual manifestations and tendencies, but at a closer observation we can see that its individual elements are interdependent, intertwined and do not exist in isolation, thus forming an organic and regularly developing whole (Loorits, 1932,

p. 45). Indeed, world culture is as diverse as various national cultures it includes, which has a balancing effect in the context of today's globalising way of life. National culture stands on a firm ground – cultural traditions. A tradition is not merely preserving something but also maintaining and transmitting, where an essential emphasis is on the standing values (Rüütel, 2000; Kuutma, 2006).

A well-known Estonian composer Veljo Tormis also finds that national cultural values are far from being values solely for ourselves, but they simultaneously appear as exchange values. Thus, in order to give someone else something, the giver has to have something to offer. By maintaining our own culture and our face we also have something to offer to the rest of the world (Tormis, 1972, p. 8). While communicating with other cultures, the nation with a rich and well-developed culture does not lose their uniqueness but on the contrary, enriches even more (Lotman, 2002, p. 181).

Outstanding development psychologists of the last century Vygotsky, Piaget, Cole, et al. have emphasised cultural environment as a source influencing human development outside social environment. They attribute essential meaning to the historically developed joint activity, communication in the process of joint activities and signs: speech, external symbols, rituals, song etc.

The aim of this research is to find out about the phenomenon of transmission of the joint singing and its role and place in Estonian culture against the background of comprehensive school. The research object of the current paper is the importance of joint singing in Estonian music education and its transmission into present day. Types of the joint singing and its development in Estonian schools beginning from the 1930s are studied. As one type of joint singing in the centre of attention is choral singing and pupils' participation in youth song festivals from 1962 to 2007.

Nature, Development and Transmission of the Joint Singing

The cultural heritage and subconscious historical perception of Estonians contains the first ever type of joint singing that emerged millennia ago – runic song, the primary functional meaning of which was related to everyday activities. Songs connected with work, play and calendar holidays developed. They were performed in exchanges between the lead singer and the chorus, where the chorus repeated the verse sung by the lead singer. This kind of singing may be viewed as an interactive act of solidarity: the performers form a unified chorus headed by the lead singer. In its widest meaning joint singing is monophonic or polyphonic choral singing, which carries an important message to the people and forms their feeling of unity.

In the 13th century another form of joint singing besides runic singing arose – the joint singing of the congregation during Roman Catholic liturgical service, which in the 17th century was replaced by hymns of Lutheran Church. In order to improve the level of church singing, make the new songs understandable to people through good performance and develop the feeling of belonging of the congregation through joint singing, schools were established at many churches. During services the pupils were involved to support the joint singing of hymns.

At the beginning of the 19th century alongside with the church parish schools became another promoter of joint singing. The spread of joint singing was further facilitated by the publication of the first songbooks, including those for schools, which contained both hymns and secular songs. In the middle of the 19th century a form of joint singing pursuing artistic goals – choral singing – powerfully emerged. In its development it followed the example of choral singing popular in the German culture area. In the second half of the 19th century choral singing was already rather widespread as well in the town as in the country, in various regions of Estonia song festivities and singing days took place where polyphonic choirs performed. At schools children choirs were founded, which participated in local singing days. The First Song Festival in 1869 turned into a real historical event - it was a milestone in the Estonian national development and cultural self-determination. Thus a new version of Estonian national culture model emerged (Degh, 1978, p. 43), the most important cultural metaphor of which became the Song Festival.

It can be stated that all aforementioned types of joint singing – runic songs, Lutheran hymns and choral singing – have through centuries had different functions in the society forming national identity and preserving feeling of unity that may be viewed as cultural transmission into the present day.

In the development of joint singing the gaining of independence of Estonian state in 1919 and the following years played an important role. Specifically in that period joint singing contributed to the development of national entirety and national culture. In the 1930s a music pedagogue, composer, publicist and researcher Riho Päts emerged as a purposeful founder of the practice of using joint singing in comprehensive school. He set about developing the tradition of joint singing, viewing as its fundamental basis the music lessons at basic school and gymnasium.

Päts considered the development of joint singing a process based on the joint song repertoire shaping a habit of spontaneous joint singing applicable at gatherings, music festivities and other public events.

In the early 1930s a joint song repertoire was adopted for primary schools, which included song repertoire compiled by Riho Päts and was published as a series of songbooks “Lemmiklaulukud” (Favourite Songbooks). The songbooks included a versatile song repertoire for forms 1 to 8, containing Estonian folk songs and folk songs of other countries, religious songs, and also patriotic songs which enjoyed a special position. Emphasising the necessity of joint singing as the most powerful means of expressing national cohesion in choral culture, Riho Päts involved the media into promoting joint singing - the Radio Broadcasting Company and the press.

Riho Päts saw a great opportunity for the development of joint singing in the activity of school choirs: on the one hand that activity was supported by the school curricula; on the other hand, children’s choirs were becoming increasingly more active at that period. Riho Päts was a promoter of their activity and also the chief conductor of children’s choirs at Song Festivals.

Today’s pupils are completely different from those of the 1930s: they are more open, responsive and smart and their development is influenced by the media and Internet as significant external factors. It has to be emphasised that alongside with the values shaped at school, pupils are essentially affected by the trends followed in the society where an important position is occupied by pop culture and its manifestations. Proceeding from the context of music education, music like any other human activity does not exist outside of human society: the problems of the structure, forms and sound technique of music, complementary music education and music aesthetics are inevitably related to the practical functioning of the society and the factors characterising it (Ross, 2006, p. 65). Therefore, in order to ensure the sustainability of music education, personality development is of essential importance, aiming at providing not only knowledge but also understanding through experience, actively involving a pupil in the process where knowledge is acquired in collaboration with others, so that pupils learn to act in groups, listen to each other, formulate questions and create something based on the available models. In other words, it is the development of social competence and empathy, in the process of which self-expression, self-realisation, self-discovery and finding one’s self become important (Adorno, 1997). All that is contained in the components of today’s music education of comprehensive school – singing, playing musical instruments, listening to music and in the greatest outlet of social empathy – Song Festivals, which is a process of interaction where communication takes place in the tension-free joint singing with all the participants pursuing the same goals (Delors, 1999, p. 88)

During the second half of the 20th century interest in folk culture, including folk music increased in the whole world, including Estonia. An important role in this process has been played by festivals of folk music where as a form of joint singing runic songs have gained popularity, winning over an increasing number of young people. A prominent contribution to the reintroducing of runic songs belongs to a well-known Estonian composer Veljo Tormis. His choral compositions that rely on the genuine runic songs have converted the ethnic text and music into joint singing that unites people. On the other hand, runic songs have also penetrated the repertoire of several pop and rock groups.

Today the most significant and popular form of national and cultural manifestation in

Estonia are Song Festivals, where beside the artistic performance of choirs an important role is played by the interaction between the choirs and the audience in the form of joint singing. A Song Festival is people's festival, being simultaneously a ritual and a spectacle. The mechanism of that event is social mobilisation – people come to the Song Festival together with their families and friends. In addition to the cultural experience importance is also attached to interaction, the need to experience a wider reintegration into the society, the sense of unity with the whole nation, its historic and cultural heritage, where both personal and collective emotions can be expressed in joint singing.

Estonian Song Festivals have been held since 1869 and take place every five years. In 2009 the 25th Song Festival will be celebrated.

Next an overview will be given of the dynamics of the participation of young people in the Song Festivals from 1962 to 2007 (Figure 1).

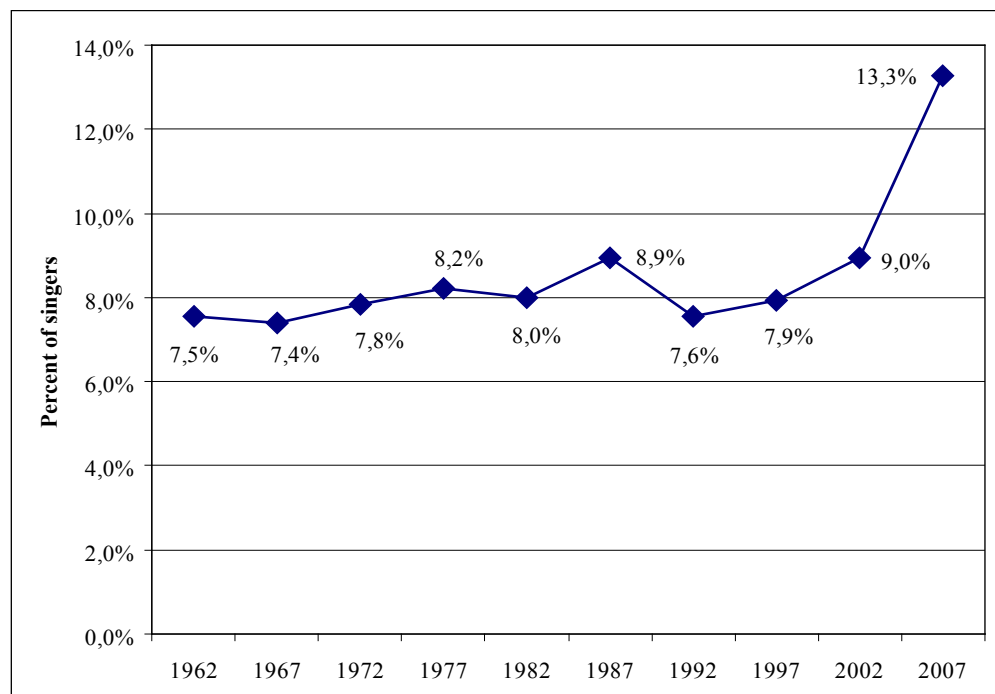


Figure 1. Participants of Youth Song Festivals in relation to the total number of pupils (%).

Figure 1 shows that the number of young people participating in the Song Festivals between 1962 and 2007 has been relatively stable, constituting 7-9% of the total number of pupils of Estonia. A great shift took place in 2007 when the number of participants increased by 4%, constituting 13.27% of the total number of pupils. That can be explained by the growth of the popularity of joint singing in the society due to national singing days, folk music festivals, etc. Of no little importance are the socialisation and psychological aspects of Song Festivals – the personal and collective emotions and a unique way to perceive one's native culture. The varied song repertoire definitely plays an important role as well. It contains traditional songs uniting different generations, but also those taking into account the music interests and trends popular among young people. Beside the works of contemporary composers, pop and rock music, which often relies on the oldest form of joint singing – runic songs, has found a place in the repertoire.

An increase in the percentage of the participants can also be observed in 1987, when it grew by 1% as compared to the previous years. This can be explained by the socio-political changes taking place in the society, which lead to the regaining of independence of Estonia as a nation state in 1991. In those years the phenomenon of joint singing emerged as a cultural phenomenon uniting and organising people.

When observing the dynamics of different types of choirs (toddlers', boys', children's, mixed and women's choirs) in Figure 2, it can be seen that the greatest increase in the number of participants has taken place in toddlers' choirs. When in 1962 only 1000 pupils participated as members of toddlers' choirs, by the end of the 1990s the figure had increased by six times and by 2007 by more than seven times. Involving a possibly large number of pupils in this choir type has been purposeful: it is at that age when the perception and habit of joint singing is shaped, which lays the foundation to the further pursuit of this activity.

The number of participants in children's choirs increased considerably in 1962-1987, after which it has been decreasing year by year (see Figure 2). The tendency of decrease in 1987-2007 can be explained by the fact that in the years 1962-1987 many children's choirs of schools with Russian as the language of instruction participated in Song Festivals, whereas since the 1990s number of Russian choirs has been decreasing due to Estonia regaining independence. One reason may be the problem with little knowledge of the Estonian language and another that the repertoire has become more musically demanding while in the Russian-language schools the habit of joint singing is not equally popular.

A positive shift can be observed in an increase in the number of the participants in the category of boys' and mixed choirs. It may be assumed that the varied and youthful song repertoire has contributed to that, especially the traditional form of joint singing - runic songs, which have recently gained great popularity.

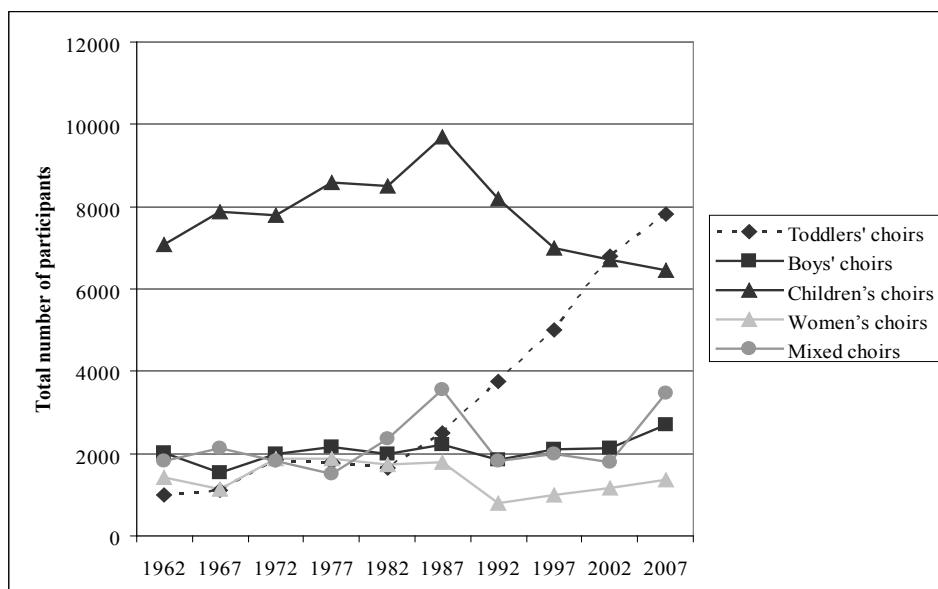


Figure 2. Participation of different choir types in Youth Song Festivals (in numbers).

In conclusion it can be claimed, that the transmission of joint singing in Estonia happens through music education of comprehensive school, the tradition of choral singing and Song Festivals, the sustainability of which has been ensured by education and cultural policy of the Estonian state. Joint singing has a firm position in the National Curriculum of comprehensive schools, which alongside with the native culture also attaches importance to the identity of ethnic minorities living in Estonia. In joint singing innovation and traditions have met: the repertoire of youth choirs has been enriched through combining the elements of runic songs and rock music. The most powerful manifestation of joint singing in Estonia is Song Festivals, the number of participants of which displays a continuous tendency to grow.

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