

# Estonia Today

## Estonian Song and Dance Festivals

### Have you ever heard 18 000 voices singing at once?

This emotional experience can be felt during Estonia's Song Festival, which occurs once every five years in Tallinn. Once in five years, tens of thousands of Estonians gather in Tallinn in the summertime to take part in the Song and Dance Festival.

The Song Festival is an enormous open-air choir concert held at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds with the participation of hundreds of choirs and thousands of singers. The number of participants in the Song Festival can reach up to 25 or 30 thousand, but the greatest number of people is on stage during the performance of the joined choirs—there are usually 18 000 singers on stage at that moment, and their powerful song touches even the most frigid Nordic disposition.

Not every choir in Estonia is able to perform at the Song Festival. Due to the popularity of the festival, there is stiff competition among the choirs, and the repertoire is rehearsed for years in advance. Only the best choirs make it to the festival.



### History of the Song Festivals

In the 19th century, Estonia was a province of a Russian Empire where German upper class landlords ruled the Estonian lower class - the peasants. The 1860s marked the beginning of a period of National Awakening. The Song Festival tradition began with the first Song Festival organised by Johann Voldemar Jannsen and the "Vanemuise" society in Tartu in June 1869. 51 male choirs and 5 brass bands encompassing 845 singers and musicians gathered in Tartu.

The first Song Festival was a high point for the Estonian national movement. The Song Festival was also a great

musical event, which created the Song Festival tradition. Six Song Festivals were held from 1879-1910, which played an important role in the nation's cultural and economic awakening and growth. The tradition of holding Song Festivals every five years began during the first Estonian independence. During World War II the tradition of Song Festivals was interrupted, but it began again in 1947. Since 1950, the Song Festivals have been held every five years. 1969 was an exception because the 100th anniversary of the Song Festival was celebrated.

The Song Festivals have taken place regardless of the political situation. The foreign authorities have tried to use the Song Festivals in their own interests. The Soviet regime always tied the Song Festivals to the "red holidays". Foreign and propagandist songs had to be sung in order to preserve the chance to sing Estonian songs. A good example of an Estonian song was "*Mu isamaa on minu arm*", which during the occupation years became an unofficial anthem for the Estonians, and which, performed by the joined choirs to the standing audience, ended every Song Festival.

### The Song Festival becomes a role model

The term "the singing nation" expresses well the Estonian identity that has united the nation in its struggle for national independence before 1918 and during the period of the Soviet occupation (1941-1991). In 1988 began the so-called "Singing Revolution", based on the Song Festival tradition, when hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the Song Festival Grounds to make political demands and sing patriotic songs. More than 300 000 people participated in a huge event entitled "The Song of Estonia" in September 1988, and for the first time the re-establishment of Estonia's independence was openly demanded. There is a belief that Estonians sang themselves free from the Soviet occupation.

### Song Festival Grounds

The I, II, IV and V Song Festivals took place in Tartu, the rest in Tallinn. The present Song Festival Grounds beheld the first festival in 1928, on a specially erected stage. The present stage was built in 1960, when the XV Song Festival took place. The biggest joined choir that has ever sung on that stage was 24 500 people (during the 100th anniversary in 1969). The joined choir usually comprises of 18 000 people, the whole Song Festival team 25-30 000 people.

On the Song Festival Grounds there is space for more than 100 000 spectators.



## Dance Festival

The first Estonian Games, Dance and Gymnastics festival, held in 1934, was the precursor of the present Dance Festival. 1 500 folk dancers performed there.

The Dance Festival is a complete performance with a certain theme. The dancers in their bright national costumes form several colourful patterns on the dance field. The Dance Festival is usually held on the same weekend as the Song Festival. These two festivals commence with a united **festive parade** through the city from the centre of Tallinn to the Song Festival Grounds.

The greatest Dance Festival of all times (the 9th) took place in 1970 with over 10 000 performers. By then a structure based on age groups had developed with performers including toddlers and seniors, the dancing veterans. The youngest dancer at this festival was 4 years old and the oldest 76! All the following festivals have had the optimal 8 000 performers.



In November 2003, UNESCO declared Estonia's Song and Dance Festival tradition a masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

## Song and Dance Festival in 2009

**2 - 5 July 2009** the 25th Song and Dance Festival will take place in Tallinn. The Song Festival celebrates its 140th anniversary, the Dance Festival 75th. The upcoming Song Festival will follow the tradition that started in 1999, namely that the Song Festival consists of two concerts of different types. The programme of the first day concert is more demanding, including the Estonian, Western and vocal symphonic repertoire. All Estonian professional choirs and the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra will be participating. The second day concert is more traditional, performing only pieces by Estonian composers.

More information from [www.laulupidu.ee](http://www.laulupidu.ee)

