

THE CLASH OF OPINIONS REGARDING INNOVATION IN A TRADITION: THE CASE OF THE REPERTOIRE OF LATVIAN NATIONWIDE SONG AND DANCE CELEBRATION

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Abstract

In this article the tradition of Song and Dance Celebration (SDC) is analysed, focusing on the aspects of innovation of its repertoire and the effect these innovations may have on the development of traditions. Repertoire is the one aspect which pervades the whole SDC process and is dealt with by all actors – organisers, participants (choir members), conductors, audience members. Repertoire is also one of the most changing aspects of the SDC, because at the beginning of every five-year cycle it is redefined and is put together anew. Lately, the content of the repertoire has been a subject of discussions especially regarding the ability of participants of the amateur-arts groups. The main goal of this article is to describe if and how innovations in the SDC repertoire are an obstacle or the source of a progress. In this article theoretical and empirical data gathered in the framework of research programme HABITUS have been used. Data show that participants are not satisfied with the proportion and content of the new compositions (innovations) in the repertoire. Nevertheless, article argues that the aspects of innovation are inevitable and necessary in order for this tradition to be sustainable, progressing and actual. It cannot be asserted that too many innovations in the repertoire could stop the SDC tradition altogether. However, it is suggested that few actions are taken in order for the tradition to keep on being widely practised and accepted by large groups of people.

Keywords: *tradition, innovation, Latvian Song and Dance Celebration, repertoire, aesthetic taste.*

In this article the tradition of Latvian Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration (further on – SDC or Celebration) will be described, focusing on the aspects of

innovation of its repertoire and the effect these innovations may or may not have on the whole development of this tradition. The content of the repertoire has been a subject of heated discussions in past few years in the SDC community, especially regarding the performance ability of participants of the amateur-arts groups. This topic is especially important since the Celebration devoted to Latvias' one hundredth anniversary is coming up in 2018. Thus, the main goal of this article is to describe if and how innovations in the Song and Dance Celebration repertoire are an obstacle or the source of a progress in the Celebration movement. In this article theoretical and empirical (quantitative, as well as qualitative) data gathered in a three-year long process of research programme HABITUS [HABITUS 2015] will be used. Throughout data gathering process it has been an aim to collect opinions of all the stakeholders (involved parties) of the SDC – to collect data about numerically smaller groups (coordinators, chief-leaders and chief-conductors, policy makers, municipality representatives) mostly in-depth interviews were conducted, whereas to reach group leaders and group members (in all three Baltic countries and in diaspora) electronic surveys were used. In some cases, to get a wider perspective, both methods were combined. In almost all the cases studies have been carried out in collaboration with Latvian National Centre for Culture to secure a representative and valid respondent range.

Introduction to Song and Dance Celebration phenomenon

The Song and Dance Celebration, which is an ongoing tradition in all three Baltic countries, is a worldwide recognized phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage based on an *a capella* singing tradition [UNESCO Latvijas Nacionālā komisija]. The SDC in Latvia started in 1873, and since then has become one of the largest mass events in Latvia. It gathers together more than 35 000 performers from amateur-arts groups and their leaders, and thousands of spectators, as well as a vast amount of organisers, media members, government representatives, tourists and others. Celebration itself lasts one week and takes place every five years in the summer, but the process is continuous – there is a constant preparation process (board meetings, rehearsals, concerts, gatherings, contests, reviews etc.) and everyday practices are carried out in the SDC interim. The SDC in Latvia is guarded by a specific Song and Dance Celebration Law [Saeima 2005] which makes it an institutionalized and determined process. In Latvian national discourse it is seen as a value in itself, because of its historically significant role in the strengthening a sense of belonging to the Latvian nation, thus creating Latvian nation itself. These traits and values are being reproduced still. Considering this, the State invests vast amount of money and resources to sustain this tradition which includes supporting rehearsals, preparing joint-repertoire, providing national costumes, improving infrastructure etc.

The SDC can be looked at and researched in many aspects, e.g., from the management viewpoint as a mass event or a historically important movement. Nevertheless, the author of this article and also researchers of the programme HABITUS have chosen to look at this phenomenon from the perspective of a tradition.

Song and Dance Celebration as a tradition

When viewed as a tradition, SDC is interpreted as a repeated action with symbolic meaning, which represents a specific value in the community and thus is transmitted to the next generation [Green 1997: 801; Treimane 2016]. Due to the historical diversity of theoretical approaches and the interdisciplinary interpretation, the phenomenon of a tradition cannot be adapted to just one definition. It is more advisable in describing a tradition to use various repeating aspects described in different theoretical sources¹. Six such characterizing aspects are: continuity, changeability, innovation and creativity, the aspect of time (or – repetition of the past), intangible and symbolic aspect, tradition bearer [Laķe & Vinogradova 2016]. All of these six aspects can be applied to the SDC, e.g., continuity is reflected in the cyclic organisational process, symbolic aspects can be seen in the Celebration as a representation of Latvian unity, patriotism etc.

Using these aspects in explaining the tradition, it is possible to have more inclusive and deeper analysis. In this article the main focus is on the aspects of continuity and innovation as symbiotic aspects in sustaining a tradition. The sources of changeability and adaptability to modern needs are creativity and innovation [Bronner 2011: 97; Vaz da Silva 2012: 44]. This applies to the SDC also – it has been managed to keep the Celebration ongoing without having any gaps or misses in the five-year cycle, at the same time the Celebration has been ever changing and developing. To name a few changes, in 1948 dancing was added as a separate event, in 1960 additional Youth SDC was added, in 1998 an idea of a whole artistic concept for the *gala* concert was introduced; new regional forms of the Celebration are introduced, more and more electronic musical instruments are used in the *gala* concert; during the soviet times songs were performed also in other languages; now the part of the Celebration is also amateur theatre events etc. [Dziesmusvetki.tv]. Innovations are inevitable and necessary for a tradition in order to be timely and important in a society, as well as innovations and changes were requisite during the Soviet times for this tradition to even be allowed to happen. Innovations and adaptations show the progress of a tradition and community's willingness to carry the tradition on. If tradition is changing and innovative, it means it is still *alive* and timely [Glassie 1995: 405].

¹ To name a few authors – Ruth Finnegan, Simon J. Bronner, Dace Bula, Dan Ben-Amos, Henrie Glassie, Francisco Vaz da Silva.

In this article author wants to talk about innovations regarding the SDC repertoire (more specifically – the repertoire that is performed in the choir *gala* concert), since it is one of the most important aspects which pervades the whole SDC process and is dealt with by all the actors – organisers, participants (choir members), conductors, chief-conductors, audience members. In its core, repertoire is also one of the most changing aspects of the SDC, because at the beginning of every five-year cycle it is redefined and put together anew, which also means including new compositions or adaptations of the songs. The author would like to point out that the repertoire in years 1990–2017 will be discussed in the context of this article¹.

The clash of opinions and tastes regarding the SDC repertoire on the whole

Repertoire for choirs is called the joint repertoire because all the choirs learn the same songs with the same level of difficulty (the only division is between women, men and mixed choirs repertoire). In average there are about 40 songs performed in the *gala* concert which takes up at least 3–4 hours. One can notice that the compass of the repertoire is extensive and is expanding with each Celebration². In order to take part in the Celebration itself, each amateur-arts group has to learn the said repertoire and stand the competition (specific reviews) in order to prove their conformity to the artistic quality standards of the Celebration. As said before, part of the repertoire repeats from year to year, but each time there is a significant amount of new compositions. Songs and the repertoire in general are chosen by the organisers, the Council of the Song and Dance Celebration and the Action Committee of the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration [Saeima 2005], and main chief-conductors, which are highly educated and respected professionals. Conducting and teaching singing, as well as composing is their main job. Some of them lead the best and most recognized and awarded choirs in Latvia. On the contrary, absolute majority of more than 15 000 *gala* concert participants (amateurs) have completely different musical education, aesthetic taste

¹ This period of time will be looked at because one can see a certain consistency in the repertoire, since in 1991 Latvia regained independence and changes were made in all areas of life. The SDC repertoire was also free from censorship and obligations put on by socialist regime. People dared to talk more about what they want to perform not so much what they are obligated to perform. Also in this period, as mentioned above, an idea of a whole artistic concept for the *gala* concert was introduced.

² It can be observed while looking at the SDC catalogues (each Celebration year a specific catalogue is issued where one can introduce themselves with artistic concept, Artistic board members, all of the concerts and planned programmes, pictures etc.). While in the 1998 there were 38 songs, in 2013 there were 44 songs (excluding songs performed by kokle ensembles and brass orchestras, and dances, the amount of which has also grown).

and expectations. The professionals wish to raise the quality of the performance as high as possible, while for most of the amateurs socialisation, communication and emotional and spiritual fulfilment is more important, and giving highly professional performance is secondary [Tisenkopfs 2003; Tisenkopfs 2007; Latvijas Kultūras akadēmijas Zinātniskās pētniecības centrs 2014].

Some authors explain the clash of opinions between amateurs and professionals in arts by using description of differences in social capital [Mueller 1951, Pavlovs 1987, Daugavietis 2015]. When acting in certain cultural field, individuals use capital (resources) they already have (time, knowledge, acquaintance etc.) to gain new ones, such as prestige, communication, identity, education, feeling of comfort, self-realisation and others. Thus, the motivation to participate differs regarding the type of the certain cultural activity. This is impacted also by the individual's type – a professional, an amateur and a consumer. These three types have different interests and they act differently based on their capitals: whilst professionals are oriented more on symbolic and economical capitals, amateurs care more about social capital and pleasure [Daugavietis 2015: 58–60]. Consequently, there exists a gap or aesthetic distance between members (leaders and participants) of certain amateur-arts group which has been a subject of research at least since publications of American sociologist John Henry Mueller about functioning of American symphony orchestras in the 1930s–50s [Mueller 1951]. Different aesthetic needs of art-group leaders and the vast majority of other musicians consequently create threat for their successful existence. Such kind of difficulties have been noticed also in the movement of SDC.

There are several aspects regarding the repertoire, which cause tension between different actors. In this article the author has chosen to name two of them, based on qualitative data gathered [HABITUS 2016/207; HABITUS 2015]:

1. The discussion about the level of difficulty and artistic excellence – there is a group of people who strongly insist that the Celebration is and should mainly be orientated towards the whole nation and cater their entertainment, thus the repertoire should include popular and publicly known songs which are easy to learn:

This is the movement of people, a folk art! Professionals should really stay in their line – let them suffer and fight with their high-level compositions. People need lightness. They need a composition they find appealing and approachable.

Ever so often repertoire is written for big, powerful choirs. Thus, average singers are repelled. Ok, sometimes at least they unburden some choirs who cannot keep up, make easier adaptations. But the audience doesn't find these super-difficult compositions appealing. They want to hear something light that stays in their memory. And composers should think about that.

Our maestro R. Pauls¹ has been saying all along, that conductors should come down from their academic heights and come closer to “simple” people.

The opposite side, however, advocates that quality standards should not be lowered and the competition still should take place.

There are too many participants. We should not let everyone participate. Those, who are too weak, need to be removed.

If we keep thinking like this, we will end up in an event, where people sing some popular songs in monophony with someone strumming a guitar in the background. But since we are under UNESCO and we have our Law [“Song and Dance Celebration Law”], the government has taken responsibility to keep this phenomenon the way it is. Our uniqueness – massive form and preciseness. 15 000 choir singers sing in 6 voices. This requires time, energy, resources.

2. The second clash of opinions is consequential from the first one mentioned – the contradiction between demand for professionalism and the real ability of amateurs. Meaning, most of the choir singers-participants are amateurs who sing in their own time as a hobby. Most of them, as noted by chief-conductors, do not even have the basic musical education – ability to read notation [HABITUS 2016/2017]. Thus, amateur-arts groups do not have the ability of a professional choir – they have less free time, less time for rehearsals, they have to devote more attention to the difficult parts of the repertoire, many groups do not have consistent set of singers etc. If sudden changes in repertoire are made, many choirs cannot catch up. Besides, many get tired of endless process of reviews and contests:

Sometimes the problem is – you have only two years to learn the repertoire. There are so many songs, that it is extremely difficult to manage to learn all of it.

Every year the choice and communication of the repertoire is very sparse, broken. We have five-year period. The first 2 years we can have only a glimpse of what will come in front of us. In the third – we are gaining some stability. In the fourth – we feel confident, but sudden changes in repertoire are made. You either quit or start over.

In reality many colleagues are against these reviews. Each year you have to prove that you are good enough. Each spring you have an exam. It is exhausting – to motivate the participants, to keep them interested and at the same time maintain the quality. Many leaders get exhausted.

¹ Ojārs Raimonds Pauls (b. on 12 January 1936) is a Latvian composer and piano player who is well known in Latvia, Russia, post-Soviet countries and world-wide. He is one of the most famous and well-known Latvian contemporary composers due to his melodious and heart-felt songs. His range of work is from popular music to musicals, ballets and choir music. He is one of the composers in Latvia that has an active concert and performing life himself. He was also the Minister of culture of Latvia from 1988 to 1993.

The two problems mentioned above are directly connected with the growing proportion of the new original compositions. They take the most time to be learned. All in all, there are many approaches the songs performed in the *gala* concert can be analysed and grouped by – thematically, by their author, by the way they are performed¹, ideologically², regarding their originality, regarding their language, and several others. The author suggests her own approach – in the context of this article to distinguish four types of compositions (songs) regarding their originality/ newness:

1. *Classics* – songs that have conquered a place in Latvian people's hearts and have been sung for many Celebrations. (Such as “Pūt, vējiņi”, “Gaismas pils”, “Manai dzimtenei”, “Saule, pērkons, Daugava”.) Usually these are dramatic or romantic ballad-type songs with a powerful and, most often, patriotic message. These songs mostly have been composed by the greatest and best-known Latvian composers³. They are almost always included in the repertoire because (a) most of the people (performers and audience) know them and can sing along (even if songs are musically challenging); (b) they symbolize the patriotic feeling and historical meaning of the SDC; (c) they have gained an indisputable status in the music field. It is worth keeping in mind though that some of the new compositions (such as “Mana dziesma” or “Dvēseles dziesma”) have managed to gain the status of a *classic* at the same year they were sung, usually because they embody the same message of patriotism and emotional belonging. This is usually created by using symbolically charged lyrics that create emotional experiences. Feeling strong emotions are highly important to the participants as it was unveiled in the SDC participant survey in 2014 [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmijas Zinātniskās pētniecības centrs 2014], where the most popular answer to the question “For you, which are the main gains from participation in SDC?” was *vivid/strong emotions that I cannot get in any other way* (73%);

2. *Semi-classics* – this category holds the largest variety of songs. These are songs that are mostly known by large group of people but they are not regularly included in the repertoire. These can be traditional folksongs, some pieces from the choir repertoire in the wider music field, or songs that had been previously written for the SDC;

¹ How they are performed: *a capella*, with orchestra, with the music accompaniment. Who is performing: everyone sings, only females sing, only males sing.

² E.g., whether or not the song expresses ideological ideas, or includes political connotations.

³ Such as Jāzeps Vītols, Emīls Dārziņš, Raimonds Pauls, Mārtiņš Brauns, Zigmārs Liepiņš and others.

3. *Adaptations* – usually new variations or adaptations by Latvian composers of Latvian folksongs. This category is very biased because these songs can be viewed as old, yet at the same time new. The highest risk, as pointed out also by representatives of Valmiera municipality [HABITUS 2015], is when the adaptation is so innovative it is hard to recognize which folksong it actually is:

It is hard to understand why we have the need to entangle simple songs, our folksongs. People do not find it appealing. There have been such adaptations that only by lyrics you can surmise what song it is. And it is only because those, up high, who make decisions, are used to working with professional choirs.

In other cases, these songs are loved and appreciated both by the performers and audience members, because most of the folksongs (such as “Līgodama upe nesa”, “Tumša nakte, zaļa zāle”, “Dziedot dzimu, dziedot augu” etc.) are widely known in Latvia and they also trigger the same patriotic, nostalgic feeling as the *classics*;

4. *New pieces (original compositions)* – these songs are specifically written for the actual Celebration. In many cases they are directly connected with the main artistic concept of the gala concert.¹ These songs have a potential to become *classics* or *semi-classics*, but in most cases their life cycle is very short and they are not afterwards performed by many choirs. This, as pointed out also by organisers and chief-conductors, is because many composers tend to be too experimental and are used to writing songs for professional singers and choirs [HABITUS 2015]. Thus, these songs are usually too difficult for most of the participants, so they have no interest in them after the Celebration.

The fourth type of compositions is mostly in the focus of this article.

Original compositions as innovations and their impact on the tradition

Up until the beginning of the last century innovation was considered to be a polar opposite to a tradition [Green 1997: 800; Bula 2011: 14]. Nowadays academics admit that innovation is an integral part of a tradition because people use it, recreate it and adjust it to their actual needs, values and views. Hence, the tradition is still important to them [Bronner 2011: 30]. Still, too many or radical changes (than cannot anymore be viewed as innovative adaptations of the old) can diminish or completely redefine a tradition [Glassie 1995: 395].

All in all, SDC participants approve of innovations and changes in the structure and representation of the Celebration, for example, data of participant survey [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmijas Zinātniskās pētniecības centrs 2014] show that when

¹ For instance, when the artistic concept was named “Līgo”, several songs were about solstice festival in Latvia.

asked how they see the Celebration in the future, 51% gave the most popular answer – *with new technologies and special effects*. When asked about important aspects in the planning of the SDC, 44% thought it is *very important* that the programme of the Celebration is *renewed each cycle of the Celebration and new elements are included*. We can infer that on the whole innovations are important for the development of the SDC. Experts also admit that it is important to have new compositions for several reasons. First, having the ability to require new repertoire signifies the high ability of the singers, which has become a trademark for Latvian Song and Dance Celebration. Ability to produce new compositions and learn them shows the high artistic excellence of Latvian music field. Since the SDC is governmentally determined event, it should have high expectations and quality. This is also agreed by several chief-conductors [HABITUS 2016/2017]:

This is not a sing-along celebration, it is a Song Celebration. And this is why I always disagree with those who expect the Celebration to be a mass sing-along event. Celebration is similar to church chorales – you go and listen to them not only because you can sing along, but because you become mentally and spiritually fulfilled. It is a new emotional experience. You can never get that from singing along to selection of ‘best hits’.

We should not be afraid to take risks. We do not need to become ‘canned goods’, you know. We need new repertoire, we need improvement, inspiration. Granted, this does not imply that the repertoire needs to be extra difficult. At the same time, it should not become child-level easy. We need to be creative and brave. Everyone may not like the repertoire, but there is no other way we can improve and progress.

Undeniably, we need the quality. If people pay big sums to come to see the concert, they want to have their money’s worth – they want to see that performers know what they have to do. [...] If you are performing, if you go on a stage, you need to take responsibility of what you are showing. You cannot do whatever and however you want. Besides, we never have requests that absolutely no participant would be able to accomplish.

Second, it is important to include vast majority of representatives of the music field in the Celebration since it is one of the biggest music events in Latvia. This means a chance has to be given to a wide range of composers and other musicians to create new pieces. The promotion of creative novelties (also new compositions) and provision of according finances has been stated as a priority also in SDC legal framework [Saeima 2005]. Third, new compositions are the element of surprise for the audience and also participants, and that decreases the risk that people could get bored with this tradition. And lastly, as mentioned before, there have been cases where original compositions have quickly become popular and accepted.

On the other hand, the high proportion of new compositions repels parts of audience and participants because they find it hard to relate with these songs, they cannot sing along and as a result they do not experience the feeling of togetherness,

so there is no emotional fulfilment. If people recognize the songs (and they repeat year after a year), they feel more comfortable and involved. Additional aspect for a resistance towards new compositions for choir members and conductors is the fact that learning the new repertoire takes too much time and effort, therefore willingness of the singers to come to rehearsals decreases, and the conductors become overworked and frustrated. Since they both are the main actors in SDC it is extremely important that they are satisfied with the process. As data [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmijas Zinātniskās pētniecības centrs 2014] show, the main reasons why people take part in amateur-arts groups are *opportunity to express my creativity and artistic ability* (47%) and *the need to meet with people with whom I can share my interests* (41%); thus, it can be concluded that people seek for emotional fulfilment and approval in their amateur-arts group, so it is very important they are satisfied with the rehearsal process.

Reason why new compositions are not easily accepted, besides their level of difficulty, is also the fact that these are so-called *experiments* and are not meant for non-professional (and large-scale) choirs. In some cases, composers lack the understanding of specifics of amateur-arts groups [HABITUS 2015]. This has been also admitted by organisers themselves. In addition, in many cases the pieces are ready in the last minute so there is no time left to test them or make any corrections in case problems with their learning are identified [Mediņa 2012]. Besides, composers usually are not very keen on making changes in their pieces. This leads to the fact that many of these compositions become *one-timers* and are rarely performed by any choir after the Celebration. Choir leaders admit – it has been so hard to teach and learn this repertoire, that after the Celebration they have no desire to work with it again [HABITUS 2016/2017; HABITUS 2015].

Another aspect worth mentioning is, that initial reaction of the participants towards new compositions tend to be negative because of their previous experiences, when they have not passed the bar and have been left out of the Celebration, because they were not able to perform these songs in the reviews. This also makes amateurs feel uncomfortable since they need to step widely out of their comfort zone.

Taking into consideration everything that has been mentioned previously, participants are very resistant towards the new repertoire and the new compositions, which create unnecessary tension and in all damages the whole process of the tradition, creating migrating of singers from choirs to dance groups, for instance.

Conclusion and prognosis

It can be concluded that since the SDC is *alive* and actively practised tradition the aspects of innovation are inevitable and necessary in order for this tradition to be sustainable, progressing and actual. The repertoire is only a part of the

whole tradition process so it cannot be asserted that too many innovations in the repertoire could stop the SDC tradition altogether. But most certainly they could change it greatly. Therefore, to keep the tradition process enjoyable for the widest part of its implementers (a.k.a. participants and group leaders), the proportion of new compositions and their content should be adjusted. Meaning, new original compositions should draw up only a small part of the repertoire. In addition, these compositions should be carefully and in multiple stages tested and adjusted in order to be in correspondence with the ability of participants. It also needs to be taken into consideration that more of consultative and explanatory work needs to be done before announcing the repertoire of the new five-year cycle, so that participants feel informed, prepared and understand the importance or the value of these compositions. We can prognosticate that even if keeping very high artistic standards could maintain the professionalism and artistic excellence of the *gala* concert, it would diminish the number of participants and in all there would be a lack of interest in this tradition. The ongoing tension would also do the damage to the image of this tradition. This would change the status of the SDC from loved tradition by a vast amount of Latvian inhabitants to an exclusive tradition meant for a small group of people (elite). Activities mentioned before could prevent this from happening and could ensure the ongoing and positive development of this tradition.

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