

Was singing necessary in the Baltic Singing Revolution, 1988-1991?

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Abstract:

The nonviolent Baltic Singing Revolution's "people power" came from singing. Exactly how this happened is a problem that scholars of Baltic history have not yet resolved. Song performers and music therapy scholars offer useful leads. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the literal meaning of songs' words was often less important than singing's physical effect on singers: The act of singing raised and released emotions of love, self esteem, and courage, which in turn motivated individuals to join the nonviolent movement even when the Soviet government unleashed public violence. The movement could emerge and grow thanks to a large shared repertoire of songs—the result of more than a century of public singing traditions. Community based, noncompetitive singing continues to be at the heart of Baltic choral song festivals today. What ideas can the Chorosynthesis project borrow and adapt?

The movement that reestablished Estonia's Latvia's and Lithuania's independence began in the late 1980s, when courageous Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians publicly broke through Soviet government restrictions on free speech and assembly. It gained force as attendance at political meetings grew from hundreds to hundreds of thousands of people. At these meetings Balts sang songs in all styles: choral songs, rock songs and folk songs; political songs, love songs, even children's school songs. After one such mass singing event in June of 1988, the Estonian journalist Heinz Valk wrote an editorial titled "Singing Revolution," giving the movement its name. He declared,

"A nation who makes its revolution by singing and smiling should be a sublime example to all. It is impossible to even imagine in Estonia's city streets the riots, barricades, burning automobiles and similar features of mass revolt by large nations. This is not our way!"¹

¹ Heinz Valk, "Laulev Revolutsioon," [Sirp ja Vasar](#) June 17 1988.; excerpts of the editorial are also quoted

Heinz Valk named songs (and smiles) as the weapons of choice in the Estonian struggle for freedom, and the idea found deep resonance in all three Baltic countries. In the spring of 1990, Balts elected three governments who promptly declared independence.

The movement's nonviolent foundations were tested from January to August of 1991, when Soviet soldiers killed and wounded people in public displays of violent force. But Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania sustained nonviolence, and achieved their goal of political independence when they established diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation from July 29 to August 24, 1991. At this great moment, the power of nonviolent political action and songs was reconfirmed. Singing Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians truly did become a sublime example to all. What they did, exclaims Gene Sharp (a leading scholar of nonviolence), "stands as a major milestone in the history of the modern world."²

This story of Baltic success is told in many history books... but historians rarely investigate the question posed by the title of this essay. Their answers fall in three categories:

What the history books say, part 1: Yes! Why do you ask?

Only a few publications have been devoted to the songs and singing which gave the movement its name.³ Most authors of Baltic history books seem to think that it's enough to call it the Singing Revolution, and then assume that the readers will understand the rest. If singing is mentioned in these studies, then typically as part of the widespread euphoria of 1988, when the freedoms of speech and assembly became reality. Several historians go on to write that the Singing Revolution ended in late 1988, after which,

by Harri Rinne, Laulev Revolutsioon: Eesti Rokipölvkonna Ime trans. Sander Liivak (Tallinn: Varrak, 2008) 262-63.

² Gene Sharp, "The New Challenge," The Baltic Way to Freedom: Non-Violent Struggle of the Baltic States in Global Context, ed. Jānis Škapars (Rīga: Zelta grauds, 2005) 424.

³ Priit Vesilind, The Singing Revolution; Vance Wolverton, "Breaking the Silence: Choral Music of the Baltic Republics. Part One - Estonia," Choral Journal 38.7 (February) (1998), Wolverton, "Part One, Estonia.", Vance Wolverton, "Breaking the Silence: Choral Music of the Baltic Republics. Part Two - Latvia," Choral Journal 38.9 (April) (1998), Vance Wolverton, "Breaking the Silence: Choral Music of the Baltic Republics. Part Three: Lithuania," Choral Journal 38.10 (May) (1998). David Puderbaugh, "How Choral Music Saved a Nation," Choral Journal 49.4 (2008).

Andrew Plakans characteristically writes, “calmer heads prevailed.”⁴ Even the well known film, *Singing Revolution*, presents songs that were sung in 1989 or earlier, but shifts the focus to political disputes and negotiations at the government level.

What the history books say, part 2: The question is not important.

And so, most historians focus on the parliamentary processes by which nonformal Baltic citizens groups created the three governments who severed ties with Moscow. Some have studied the movement’s nonviolent tactics and expanded the *Singing Revolution’s* history backwards to find precedents in events that took place decades, or even a century earlier.⁵ But nearly all authors mention songs only in passing, or not at all.

Baltic historians are, surprisingly, not that different from historians of nonviolent movements worldwide. In the international field, many books have been devoted to political tactics, and to the biographies and moral and philosophical writings of movement leaders.⁶ The past two decades have produced many ethnographic descriptions of conflict resolution in “peaceful societies.”⁷ We know less, however, about the shared texts and traditions through which large masses of individuals took ownership of nonviolent principles and joined these movements. Songs and singing, for example, are rarely documented ethnographically.⁸ That historians have overlooked

⁴ Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 386-401. Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 160-71. A historiography of the *Singing Revolution* appears in Guntis Šmidchens, “Was Singing Necessary in the *Singing Revolution*?” *Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, Baltic studies newsletter* 28, 1 (2009), 6-7.

⁵ Olgerts Eglitis, *Nonviolent Action in the Liberation of Latvia*, The Albert Einstein Institution Monograph Series vol. 5 (1993).; G. Miniotaite, *Nonviolent Resistance in Lithuania : A Story of Peaceful Liberation* (Boston, MA: Albert Einstein Institution, 2002).; Mark Beissinger, “The Intersection of Ethnic Nationalism and People Power Tactics in the Baltic States, 1987-91,” *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, ed. Adam Roberts, and Timothy Garton Ash (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist : With Essays on Ethics and Politics* (Boston: P. Sargent Publishers, 1979).; Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful : A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).; Nicholas Gier, *The Virtue of Nonviolence : From Gautama to Gandhi* (Albany: State University of New York, 2004).; Gene Sharp, *There Are Realistic Alternatives* (Albert Einstein Institution, 2003).

⁷ Graham Kemp, and Douglas P. Fry, ed., *Keeping the Peace: Conflict Resolution and Peaceful Societies around the World* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Elsie Boulding, *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), Leslie E. Sponsel, and Thomas Gregor, ed., *The Anthropology of Peace and Nonviolence* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

⁸ Kerran L Sanger, *“When the Spirit Says Sing!” The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement*

singing as a historical phenomenon is illustrated, for example, in the book by Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful*, written to accompany the six-part PBS series about the history of nonviolence. In the index, they list many keywords related to nonviolent struggle:

ahimsa, armed struggle, boycotts, Catholic Church, civil disobedience, doctors, elections, financial sanctions, general strikes, hunger strikes, Internet, leaflets, marches, media, negotiating, noncooperation, petitions, refusal to work, resignations, self-rule, sit-ins, strikes, (withholding) taxes, underground press, violence, work stay-aways,

but no singing, and no songs. The book does mention singers here and there, but the fact that these keywords are missing in the index shows that even leading scholars of nonviolent history do not ask the question posed above.

What the history books say, part 3: Vague hints that singing had a negative effect

Some analysts are wary of singing. Mark Beissinger, for example, imagines that Estonian concerts during the summer of 1988 were an “orgy” of nationalism.⁹ (We’ll leave aside the question of whether his description is accurate, because we’re here not discussing what happened, but rather, how he writes about it). In singing, he senses a regression from enlightened thought to irrational animal behavior. Anthropologists, too, may look for the evolutionary origins of human singing in animal calls. The general idea that poetry and songs are a less civilized means of expression goes back at least to the 18th century Enlightenment, when, for example, the head of the revolutionary French parliament rejected the tradition of singing political speeches.¹⁰ But my own most

(New York: Garland, 1995). Joe Street, *The Culture War in the Civil Rights Movement* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Many books about political movement songs chronicle authors’ names and dates when selected representative songs were produced and performed, but do not analyze poetics, content and performance context of a movement’s song repertoire. The context of group singing is absent, for example, in Dorian Linskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

⁹ Beissinger, “Intersection of Ethnic Nationalism and People Power,” 234. Anatol von Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, Second ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 113, 394, note 6.

¹⁰ Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution : Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 126.

disappointing encounter with this perspective came in a Lithuanian scholar's agitated response to my paper on this topic. The independence movement, he exclaimed, had to replace songs with legal discourse, because "we couldn't sing a new constitution." He was right, of course. A constitution couldn't be sung. But he was wrong on the idea that singing was somehow less important.

And so, the consensus of historians seems to be that songs were, indeed, present in the Baltic around 1988, but that it's more important to write about other things. Luckily, say some, singing did not do any harm. Something is missing here.

Are songs a sign of mutual recognition among movement participants?

Nonviolence tacticians stress the importance of having symbols to publicly identify active participants in the movement. Movements are named after these symbols. We see this, for example, in the Revolution of Roses in Georgia in November of 2003, when the nonviolent opposition broke into the parliament holding roses (not guns) in their hands, and in the current "White" Revolution in Russia, where supporters of democracy carry white balloons, ribbons and flowers. In the same way from 1988 to 1991, Balts carried flags and ribbons in the national colors. Songs, perhaps, did something similar. But if symbols of recognition were an essential force of the Baltic revolution as they have been in other named revolutions, then visual items like flags were much more effective. Flags were everywhere, identifying participants, but it was not called the "flag revolution." Songs were somehow more important.

Do song words express a group's nonviolent or patriotic ideology?

A nonviolent political movement, it seems, should be fueled by songs containing nonviolent rhetoric: The "Freedom Songs" of the American civil rights movement are a good example: They centered on themes of perseverance and unity, and song words helped singers prepare psychologically for actions such as marching, voting, or sitting in

prison, and certainly not killing.¹¹ A comparable example from the Baltic might be a song performed by the Lithuanian rock group, Antis:

How strange our army
no weapons, young people only

But there are only a handful of Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian songs with explicitly nonviolent words. In fact, many more popular songs were songs about war! “There, across the wide rivers, our shimmering troops, defending dear Lithuania”; “fighting against the enemy (of Estonians)”; “After the very last shot rings out, Latvia will be free!” Song words balanced between nonviolent and violent rhetoric... but Baltic singers never turned violent. If out of the opposed texts only nonviolent texts led to action, then a connection of song words and popular ideology doesn’t work.

Another analytical approach might relate songs to nationalism. Many songs of the singing revolution explicitly declared national identity, and urged the nation to unite in the name of the common homeland. Mark Beissinger proposes that “non-violence and passionate ethnic identity need not be incompatible,” arguing that in the Baltic, the emotional bonds created by nationalism were a resource for peaceful mass politics.¹² He does not discuss the role of songs, but his arguments leave open the possibility that singing, like nationalism, could have gone either way, supporting either nonviolent or violent action.

But if all of the songs that Balts sang from 1988 to 1991 are considered, then ideological interpretations of songs again are on wobbly foundations. My fieldwork in the Baltic from 1990 to 1992 found that, although both patriotism and nonviolence were common themes in public songs, the words to many other songs, or maybe even most songs, were not political. When people sang informally, for example, during the 1990 song festival processions or in the trams and busses on their way home after concerts, they sang myriad folk songs about love, courtship and marriage, and even children’s songs!

¹¹ Sanger, "When the Spirit Says Sing!" The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement 134-49.

¹² Beissinger, "Intersection of Ethnic Nationalism and People Power," 232.

Singing was publicly defined as nonviolent action

Song words were sometimes important, but they were not always critical. Meanings of songs were defined by the explicit rhetoric that surrounded them, beginning with Heinz Valk's 1988 editorial quoted above, and culminating with public speeches in January of 1991, when the Soviet government turned violent. In Vilnius, Lithuania, Soviet troops took over the newspaper printing plant and the television broadcasting tower, killing fourteen civilian defenders and wounding hundreds more. Nevertheless, on January 13, thousands of Lithuanian civilian defenders gathered in the square around their national parliament building. Several hundred meters beyond them gathered another, hostile crowd of Soviet soldiers in civilian clothes. President Vytautas Landsbergis spoke to the people in the square, reiterating the national tactics of nonviolent struggle and song:

“And in case they begin to attack you, if they throw something or hit somebody, our biggest weapon would be if you did not answer with the same. You are our shield, not our sword. We have always won because we held back. Let us hold back. [...]

Many of you probably feel humiliation and hatred in your hearts, directed at the scoundrels who are doing this to Lithuania. But nevertheless, suppress that anger, turn your backs to them, look at each other, but not at the enemy. Look into the eyes of the person who is close to you, your comrade, and sing. Song helped us, it helped for many centuries. And now, too, let's sing something, let's sing sacred hymns, only let's not bicker or swear or allow ourselves to be pulled into a brawl. Let there be more calm in our hearts, more light and faith. But let us leave the evil feelings and crimes to them. Let us be what we must be, and our Lithuania will be bright and happy! Let us not pay attention to that shooting, let us sing!”¹³

That is what they did. Lithuanian participants, both religious believers and not, remember singing a song of prayer, “Maria, Maria, most beautiful lily, you shine high in

¹³ Excerpt from the minutes of the 22nd meeting of the Lithuanian Supreme Council, January 13, 1991, in Vytautas Landsbergis, ed., *Nauji Dokumentai Apie Sausio 13-Ają* (Vilnius: 2003) 106-07.

heaven above; Oh come, ease slavery, come, save humankind, rescue from the terrifying foe.” Some add that the prayers were answered when the hostile crowd dispersed.

Songs were important. They helped movement participants meet each other. They sometimes expressed the movement’s ideology in words. But usually it was the act of singing, not the words, which participants saw as the main symbol that expressed the nonviolent movement’s essence.

After the January 1991 events in Vilnius, Latvians in Riga and Estonians in Tallinn also prepared for a Soviet attack. They built barricades around media broadcast facilities and government buildings, and posted unarmed guards who were trained in civilian-based defense. The rhyming Latvian proverb, “Ar garaspēku pret karaspēku” (“use spiritual power against military power”) expressed their ideology in words. Choirs, too, sang on the barricades to lift spirits. Songs sent a message to their adversary in Moscow. Latvian conductor Haralds Mednis would later summarize what Soviet officials had to see, even if they might not understand the words: “A singing people is not dangerous.”¹⁴

Songs affected individuals, but how?

Analyses of music in political movements often stress its role in group behavioral control. Steven Brown points out that, for example, music homogenizes social behavior; it reinforces group ideologies by persuasion and manipulation; it defines and reinforces social identity; and it creates group-level cooperation.¹⁵ Whether these responses to music are voluntary or involuntary is to be determined, and both effects may coexist. Anthropologists, musicologists and psychologists point out that music can both express and induce emotional states of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and love.¹⁶

¹⁴ Laima Muktupāvela, *Brāli Brāli: Balsu Burvji Brāļi Kokari* (Rīga: Dienas Grāmata, 2008) 93-94.

¹⁵ Steven Brown, and Ulrik Volksten, ed., *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006) 4-5.

¹⁶ Juslin and Sloboda argue that the mechanisms of “distraction” and “perceived control” do not adequately explain music’s effect, which is mediated by music’s effect on the emotions, Patrick N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, “The Past, Present, and Future of Music and Emotion Research,” *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, eds. Patrick N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 940.

Viewers from outside sometimes speculate as to what happens in each singer's mind. Benedict Anderson imagines an individual's selfless transcendence into an imagined existence among the nation's millions, "no matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes":

"How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound."¹⁷

Others sense terrible consequences of mass singing: If these singers with no sense of self were to be manipulated by evil conductors, they could turn into fascists and Nazis. The journalist Anatol Von Lieven, for example, hints that the Latvian national song festival of 1990 might have been a racist ritual where "General Will" overpowered individual, cosmopolitan liberty.¹⁸ Come to think of it, we should be worried. If Chorosynthesis succeeds in expanding the scope of American choral music, their project may well threaten democracy and liberty, and everything we hold dear in the USA.

But seriously, psychological research shows how music really does bond people, and the picture is different from Anderson's or Lieven's. Monique Ingalls points out that when many people sing together, Anderson's imagined community becomes "temporarily emplaced, embodied by actions and expressions" of the participants.¹⁹ Music creates feelings of "boundary loss" and trust among people, and the experience is based in each individual's emotions, grounded in that person's personal choices.²⁰ The idea that singing is selfless is roundly rejected by specialists in singing performance. Expert conductor Elaine Brown, for example, knows that a choir consists only of individuals:

"Too often... we view choirs as masses or *walls of people that we 'conduct.'* We tend to conduct anonymously. Imagine, if you will that there is a piece of string or tether connecting from your center to each person in the choir. In other words,

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006) 145.

¹⁸ Lieven, The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence 113, 394, note 6.

¹⁹ Monique Ingalls, "Singing Heaven Down to Earth: Spiritual Journeys, Eschatological Sounds, and Community Formation in Evangelical Conference Worship," Ethnomusicology 55.2 (2011): 263.

²⁰ Steven Mithen, The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006) 208-11.

a one-to-one connection with each singer. They are lines of communication from your center to each person in the choir. And it is a two-way street: you communicate to them and they communicate to you on a one-to-one basis. I and Thou, you and me. Honest and direct. There is no other way.”²¹

Latvian conductor Māris Sirmāis elaborates, “A conductor must work with each person individually, teaching that person not only how to sing correctly, but how to emotionally project yourself so intensively that what you do as a unit, as a personality, speaks to listeners. So that each person standing in this energy circuit would feel these energetic charges all around, next to themselves on the right and on the left.”²²

And so, singing does not erase individual identity. To the contrary, it erases anonymity and connects the individual singer very directly and personally to other individuals. Singing is related to a person’s personal emotions.

Singing enhances individual health and emotional well-being.

Music’s effect on human health has been documented, though the mechanisms are not well understood: It relaxes patients, allowing doses of anaesthetics to be reduced. It may reduce stress and lower the likelihood of repeated heart attacks. Its therapeutic effects in treating mental disorders are well established. Singing enhances the body’s immune functions.²³ The field of music therapy originally aimed to reduce symptoms in an individual, but now has expanded to explore health benefits for individuals in singing communities, involving emotions related to “participation and performance; responsiveness and responsibility; relationship and belonging; enablement and empowerment.”²⁴ The Baltic Singing Revolution may also be analyzed in light of these

²¹ Elaine Brown, quoted by James Jordan, [The Musician's Soul: A Journey Examining Spirituality for Performers, Teachers, Composers, Conductors, and Music Educators](#) (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1999) 91.

²² Interviewed by Anita Melleupe, [Kamēr... Māris Sirmāis Un Latvija Dzied!](#) (Riga: Likteņstāsti, 2008) 121.

²³ Suzanne B. Hanser, "Music, Health, and Well-Being," [Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications](#), eds. Patrick N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). G. Kreutz, S. Bongard, S. Rohrmann, V. Hodapp and D Grebe, "Effects of Choir Singing or Listening on Secretary Immunoglobulin a, Cortisol, and Emotional State," [Journal of Behavioral Medicine](#) 27 (2004).

²⁴ Brynjulf Stige, Gary Ansdell, Cochavit Elefant, and Mercédès Pavlicevic, "When Things Take Shape in Relation to Music: Towards an Ecological Perspective on Music's Help," [Where Music Helps: Community](#)

findings of Community Music Therapy. Singing affected and changed singers' emotions, healing trauma and fortifying self-assurance for actions that shaped historical events.

Everyday stress and emotional problems can lead to anxiety that lowers the quality of performance.²⁵ Singing performance, on the other hand, can counteract a person's emotional problems: Psychologists agree that the act of singing enhances human self esteem, which in turn helps heal depression and related social ills. "Music therapy" and group singing has improved the lives of homeless people, crime-prone street youths, adults with severe physical disabilities, and individuals suffering from grief or depression.²⁶ In the Baltic, singing could melt the heritage of Soviet domination. It could counter traumatic memories of the cruel mass violence inflicted by Joseph Stalin, and calm a mind-numbing everyday clash between official Soviet propaganda and lived experience.

Singing's effect on self-esteem also played a role. Nonviolence tactician Robert L. Helvey identifies the "absence of self-confidence" as a key reason why oppressive rulers can convince populations to obey them, and adds that that low self confidence is lowered even further by fear of punishment. The Soviet Union was no different. Schools attempted to implant in every child a collective Soviet identity that would supersede individual, family, or ethnic identity. Submission to the collective was the rule: A common motif that I have heard in Baltic life stories is the Soviet-era teacher who ordered a child to lip-sync while the class sang, to keep their voice from sticking out from the choir. But singing from the heart, if it occurred and was not squelched by a conformist teacher, would give a person feelings of individual empowerment which led,

Music Therapy in Action and Reflection, ed. Brynjulf et al. Stige (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010) 302.

²⁵ Dianna T. Kenny, and Bronwen Ackermann, "Optimizing Physical and Psychological Health in Performing Musicians," The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology, ed. Susan Hallam, Ian Cross, and Michael Thaut (Oxford University Press, 2009) 393-96.

²⁶ Betty Bailey and Jane Davidson, "Amateur Group Singing as a Therapeutic Instrument," Nordic Journal of Music Therapy 12.1 (2003). Mercédès Pavlicevic, "Crime, Community, and Everyday Practice: Music Therapy as Social Activism," Where Music Helps: Community Music Therapy in Action and Reflection, ed. Brynjulf Stige, Gary Ansdell, Cochavit Elefant, and Mercédès Pavlicevic (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010). Cochavit Elefant, "Giving Voice: Participatory Action Research with a Marginalized Group," Where Music Helps: Community Music Therapy in Action and Reflection, ed. Brynjulf Stige, Gary Ansdell, Cochavit Elefant, and Mercédès Pavlicevic (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010). Hanser, "Music, Health, and Well-Being," 865-68. Henk Smeijsters and José van den Hurk, "Music Therapy Helping to Work through Grief and Finding a Personal Identity," Journal of music therapy 36.3 (1999).

in turn, to the courage that an individual needed to publicly step out of the submissive crowd.

The mechanism of how, physically, this takes place, hasn't been documented. Song performers have delved deep into what happens when a person sings. James Jordan writes, "Music making is constructed of correct notes, correct rhythms, dynamics and articulation. But the mortar of music is human trust (of self and others), belief in self and others, and love of self." If a performer fails to find the right state of mind, then "human nature will thrust his spirit to a place of anger, mistrust of the ensemble, mistrust of self, inhumaneness, varying degrees of violence in both gesture and words (especially gesture), and a general state of frustration," and all of the above will be audible in a choir's singing. This is why professional singers train themselves to go to "that place" of vulnerability, openness, and self-acceptance: "In order to make music, one must be able to meet others on the equal ground of trusting and loving. In order to accomplish that goal, one must be able to look inward and realize the trust and love that already exists in oneself."²⁷ During the Singing Revolution, millions of Baltic singers found "that place," together.

How does singing affect a singer? What does singing feel like? The Baltic singers with whom I have discussed this question cannot say. When asked, instead of answering the question, they typically invite you to sing with them. An easy song for starters is the call-response chant of the Estonian Singing Revolution:

If you truly trust yourself, (audience repeats: If you truly trust yourself),
and the wisdom of wise people, (and the wisdom of wise people),
and the shoulders of strong people, (and the shoulders of strong people),
and the power of the ancients, (and the power of the ancients),
and the quickness of the young men, (and the quickness of the young men),
and the sisters and the brothers, (and the sisters and the brothers),
and above all, trust yourself, (and above all, trust yourself):

[...]
Courage will be powerful,
And you'll get a better life.

²⁷ Jordan, Musician's Soul 7, 32, 111-12.

Singing gives courage

Robert Helvey describes one mechanism by which singing overcomes fear at nonviolent public demonstrations: Songs and chants provide “a constant reminder that no one is alone.”²⁸ But the Baltic experience showed that there’s more to it. Songs do more than merely signal one’s presence to others in the group; in the Baltic, singing created courage. One example of this occurred shortly before noon on January 11, 1991. Lithuanian cameramen filmed Soviet troops, clubs and rifles at the ready, lined up in front of the Vilnius newspaper printing plant. Facing them on the building steps was a line of Lithuanian women and men. They knew that other Lithuanians were standing next to them, because their elbows were locked together. But they also sang with bravura the song about a father who wanted his sons to be farmers, not soldiers:

... Don’t you worry, oh dear father,
 Don’t you worry, oh dear father,
 Don’t you worry, oh dear father,
 Your son will soon grow up bigger,
 Your son will soon grow up bigger.
Your son will soon grow up bigger,
 Your son will soon grow up bigger,
 Your son will soon grow up bigger,
 He’ll be Lithuania’s soldier,
 He’ll be Lithuania’s soldier...²⁹

These Lithuania’s soldiers were not holding guns. The outcome of the Soviet military offensive was never in doubt. Minutes later, the armed Soviets would beat a passage through the crowd and occupy the building, shutting down its printing presses. The country’s mass media was not yet entirely under Soviet control, and images of these brave, smiling, singing, unarmed Lithuanian soldiers were broadcast nationwide. Thousands of volunteers, one by one, acquired courage and flooded into Vilnius to join their ranks.

²⁸ Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (Washington DC: The Albert Einstein Institute, 2004) 23, 104.

²⁹ The event is documented in a 2008 film by Zita Kelmickaitė, *Dainos galia*.

Conclusion: Yes, singing was necessary

Singing, and particularly singing with groups, is an intensely personal experience of bonding with other individual humans. The experience strengthens self esteem, love, and individual courage. Without individual courage (multiplied by thousands), in 1991 there would not have been thousands of people standing on the barricades in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, unarmed, ready to receive their Soviet adversary's violence, hoping to awaken their attackers' conscience. The leaders of the independence movements depended on this show of strength, the "people power" which stood around them. Without these thousands of brave individuals blocking the path of Soviet tanks and guns (under the watchful gaze of journalists from around the world), military action could have been swift and efficient. A mere several hundred parliamentary leaders could have been easily removed, and Soviet order reinstated.

Some comparative notes related to singing in the United States

The USA is not struggling for liberation from foreign rule or a Communist dictatorship. This is also true for today's Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which recently celebrated two decades of independence. Nowadays Baltic and American choirs face similar challenges: Amateur, volunteer singers have so many choices of activities, and so little time. Why is singing still necessary in their lives? How can singing traditions we love be strengthened?

The historical context of Baltic singing differs from its American counterpart. The Singing Revolution emerged from traditions that were long-lived and widespread. Protestant congregational singing took root about four hundred years ago. National choral traditions, including mass song festivals, began in the late 19th century. Choral singing has been taught in public schools for most of the past century. Most Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians thus share a relatively large repertoire of songs that they can sing whenever the occasion arises, even in four-part harmony!

Centuries of national singing traditions have trickled down and percolated up into countless informal family singing traditions. Family traditions are where, for example, Latvian conductor Māris Sirmāis began his career. His father recalls that when Māris

was still a little boy, “At family gatherings you only had to give him a flower, and he was ready to sing all night—he would climb up on a chair or bench, sing and conduct!”³⁰ Today, Sirmais leads the amateur choir that placed first in Interkultur’s 2011 world rankings.³¹ Would he have become a conductor had there been no clan of friends and relatives who shared words and melodies to hundreds of songs, and loved to sing them, often, at parties, enabling his joyful clowning as a child?

Although some Baltic choirs today do very well in international championships, competition is not at the heart of their singing traditions. Latvian conductor Ivars Cinkuss points out that “The song festival movement is based on the so-called average choirs – and it is absurd and difficult to evaluate which of those choirs is better; I try to avoid that if at all possible.... Victory in a competition does not improve our culture... The deepest essence of the song festival movement is the people’s “wanting to do”, and not “displaying skill.”³² The artistic skill of these average Latvian choirs, he notes, remains strong nevertheless: The 20,000 singers in the song festival choir want to sing fifty or sixty a capella songs in four- and five-part harmony, conductors want to conduct, composers want to compose for them, and together, once every five years, they create unique, powerful music.

Finally, the Baltic Singing Revolution was not based on any one particular singing style. Choral singers, rock singers, folk ensembles, and informal singers among the public, too, all were singing together at public events from 1988 to 1991. Interaction among styles and singers of all kinds continues to inspire new art. Can we uncover something similar in our country? I hope so.

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³⁰ Interviewed by Mēlupe, *Kamēr...* 31.

³¹ Interkultur World Rankings as of April 2011, <http://www.interkultur.com/leftnavi/world-rankings/>.

³² Interviewed by Mēlupe, *Kamēr...* 136.

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