

**ESTONIAN SONG CELEBRATION MOVEMENT  
AND ITS LEADERS:  
THE STORY OF TUUDUR VETTIK**

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on the role and fate of some outstanding and creative intellectuals-choir leaders and composers in the Movement of the Estonian Song Celebrations. The position of song celebrations and that of the creative intellectuals – choir leaders in socio-political processes are examined in this research, looking at the years before and after WWII period and the years of Soviet annexation. One of the most remarkable personalities during this period was the conductor, composer and music teacher Tuudur Vettik. The article researches the way of becoming a leader of the popular cultural movement and tries to answer a question – did Tuudur Vettik become such kind of a leader of Song Celebrations through his methodological activity or pure charisma. This paper also tries to find out what kind of circumstances helped or obstructed him on this way. The article helps to fill a gap in the research of Estonian post-WWII choral music history, since the cultural policy of the period has been studied mostly from the aspects of literature, theatre and art.

**Keywords:** historical research, Soviet cultural policy, ideological mental violence, intellectual resistance, Song Celebration Movement, Song Festival Ground, Song Celebration leaders, choral music, repertoire, conductor, Tuudur Vettik, Roland Laasmäe, Estonia

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### **1. Introduction**

The fact that the Song Celebrations form an important part of the Estonian culture, and constitute a pillar of our national identity is obvious to everyone in Estonia. Sadly, this is where it ends. We have become used to viewing our Song Celebrations as single cultural events, while their broader context as the Song Celebration Movement is often neglected.

My article focuses on the Estonian Song Celebration Movement, as well as on the activities of Tuudur Vettik, who played an important role in shaping it. Did Vettik indeed become the leader of the Song Celebration Movement, and what contributed to this?

Tuudur Vettik is by no means unknown in historical research; however, he has been pushed to the sidelines. Information about his life and creative work reached research papers in 1988, at the dawn of the Singing Revolution. The role of Vettik in Estonian music life has been researched by Helju Tauk (Tauk 1988:89), and Urve Lippus (Lippus 2002:7–78). Lippus highlights the strong ties between Vettik and the Estonian national culture, music, and patriotic ideas. In her book, Urve Lippus points out the need to broaden the source basis of research, among other things, and puts emphasis on memoirs as valuable sources besides the archival and press materials (Lippus 2011:9–10). Maris Männik-Kirme has done a remarkable job in returning Tuudur Vettik to the Estonian culture. She has studied the activities of Tuudur Vettik and Mart Saar in enriching Estonian choir music (Männik-Kirme 1982:219–234), and has published a factological review of Tuudur Vettik's biography, as well as a list of his works (Männik 1990). Unfortunately, these analyses reproduce some incorrect facts from earlier studies concerning to Vettik's birthplace and birthdates, which are very important biographical data (Randjärv 2012:26). Generalisations have also slipped in.

In my research of Tuudur Vettik, I have scrutinised the relevant literature, news publications, and archival materials (the results of which, however, only serve as the background for this article). I have also set great store by the memoirs of Vettik's contemporaries, and people connected to the Song Celebration Movement, as well as the handwritten notes and journals in private archives. The latter sources throw a light on the developments and intrigues not discussed elsewhere, as well as on what went on during the organisation of Song Celebrations. Well-known choir conductors and teachers have been interviewed by the author (Randjärv 2012:157–226).

The incentive for writing this article came from a recent article by Hain Rebas, which once again pointed out the erroneous interpretations, gaps, and insufficiently researched questions surrounding the Song Celebration Movement (Rebas 2016/1:129–150).

## 2. Song Celebration Movement

### 2.1. General facts

The historical and cultural studies describe the regular Song Celebrations as extremely important and ceremonious cultural events; yet the relevant repertoire policy, criteria for selecting the Head Conductors, activities of the choirs during the intervals of the Song Celebrations, events for different types of choirs, repertoire training for conductors, but also interpersonal conflicts, intrigues and cooperation, dependency on the national budgetary policy, and ideological trends

have not been analysed as organic components of the phenomenon, but rather as a purely illustrative and emotional background. The Song Celebration Movement has several particular features that allow it to mould, and be moulded by social developments. The most important among these is the development of a social network. Although the Song Celebrations as events have been the most visible and important feature of our choir history, their role cannot be viewed apart from their foundations – the history of the Estonian choir culture, and our societies movement.

I use the term *Song Celebration Movement* to signify a higher integrated system where the content and the format of the work, including the repertoire policy, clearly follow the seasonal cycle of the work plans of the national as well as county level song festivals, and those for specific choir types, the preliminary singing competitions (for categorisation), and eventually also the working plans of the choirs. One of the most significant features of the Song Celebration Movement is how the choir movement became a mass cultural phenomenon of a highly professional level, with extremely skilled and highly educated creative figures/choirmasters playing a special role. The Song Celebration Movement in the broader sense of the term also includes folk dance festivals, and the performances of brass bands.

The Song Celebration Movement as a broader term means keeping, enriching, and further developing the historical traditions of ethnic culture, and increasing the national sense of unity and patriotism both in Estonia, and the whole Estonian diaspora. This means that equal importance is accorded in the 20th century to organising the activities of the choirs in preparation for the Song Celebration Movement, and stimulating the drive for freedom outside the Estonian borders as well, i.e. among the expatriate community. I agree with Hain Rebas in that the activities and the song festivals of the expatriate choirs also form an organic part of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement. We must not forget the nature, scope, or national impact of the large expatriate song festivals, although these were systematically ignored, scorned, and belittled for decades in Soviet Estonia (Rebas 2016:130).

The face of the Song Celebration Movement is shaped by its intellectual and contemporary leaders of the time. The influence of conductor and music teacher Tuudur Vettik as an intellectual leader has spread beyond the Estonian borders through his students and followers. The school of Tuudur Vettik – the pillar of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement – also lived on through a number of expatriate choir conductors – Vettik's academic children and grandchildren. Toi and Kiisk, as well as the long-term conductors of the Estonian Male Choirs in Gothenburg and Stockholm Eero Tarjus and Lembit Leetma, and conductor Manivald Loite of the large New York Estonian Male Choir, had all been students of Tuudur Vettik (Rebas 2016/1:137–138). Rebas says that it was difficult to imagine a more direct continuity in the Estonian post-war choir music; this emphasises that the level of the Estonian choir music, and a genuine Estonian attitude lived on through Juhan Aavik, Eduard Tubin, and Tuudur Vettik; the next

generation, including Olav Roots, Roman Toi, and Harri Kiisk, kept it alive particularly in Germany and Sweden, and later in Canada, USA, and elsewhere (Rebas 2016/1:138).

A wider view of the 147-year history of the Song Celebration Movement shows that the Celebrations have always had strong ties to politics, and the ideas of national unity. Some researchers have viewed these as demonstrations of the people's submission to the authorities, and this is also exactly how the authorities have tried to portray it. On the other hand, great emphasis has been put on the hidden opposition behind the Song Celebrations, or they have even been portrayed as a form of a national cultural resistance movement. Both claims contain more than a grain of truth. The Song Celebrations and the songs performed at these were at the service of the reigning social order in one way or another, because a public confrontation with the authorities would have led to a rapid eradication of both the Song Celebrations, and the Song Celebration Movement. Internal opposition and achievement of national cultural objectives against the will of the authorities was generally covert to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the nature and forcefulness of the policy of the rulers, and their methods for influencing the life in the society.

The Song Celebration Movement was also a direct prequel to our Singing Revolution and the restoration of independence, because the choirs – voluntary societies of like-minded people – constituted the base cells of a free society. They kept a close eye on social changes in the informal atmosphere of choir practices. They exchanged information and opinions, followed the painful social problems despite the rigid conditions of the communist dictatorship. A large part of the choirs were associations founded on free thought, and were morally opposed to the Soviet ideology. There was a strong atmosphere of trust within the choirs, as well as among the family members of the singers. With their traditions, internal rules, and agreements, the choirs formed a kind of a huge family which shared thoughts and information that were censored from the official channels. This is confirmed by the memories of the singers from the Gaudeamus Male Choir, established by Roland Laasmäe, a student of Vettik (Randjärv 2012:157–226).

Kuno Areng has aptly said that the “leaders of the Song Celebration Movement had to steer between the rocks like Jannsen” in order to be able to organise the Song Celebrations that were so important for the Estonian people. The dominant message of the Song Celebrations has been patriotic: a strong emotional reaction to the compulsory praising of foreign authorities, their symbols, and personality cults during the hegemony of the tsars, or the Communist Party.

Has the Song Celebration Movement been an apologue of the regime, or its classical opposition? The strong oppositional content of the Song Celebration Movement is also testified by the fact that a certain crisis and a need to look for new ideas became evident during the early years of the restored independence. This was because we had lost an ‘enemy’ against whom the people could unite, which is why many mistakenly felt that the national cultural traditions and fundamental values were now protected *per se*.

## *2.2. Song Celebration Movement during Vettik's era*

In his 1933 account of the 10th Song Celebration, Hanno Kompus listed a number of features that do not describe a single specific festival but the Song Celebration Movement in general. He saw it as a socio-ethical phenomenon that had kept the nation united through adversities as a sort of general mass manifestation, or patriotic political and social event that united the nation, and centred around the art of singing; at the same time, a single Song Celebration could not be considered a concert to evaluate, but rather a party to be lived. Or “life to be partied” (Kompus 1976:180–181).

In the mid-1930s, an emotional vacuum took hold of the Song Celebration Movement. This was a time when the society started to discuss the very purpose of the Song Celebrations, just as it happened after Estonia regained its independence (Võrk 1936:53–56). Enn Võrk wrote: “There is a doubt whether the Song Festivals fulfil, in the form they are presently organised, their purpose completely, or whether we should start downsizing these when they seem to lose public interest” (Võrk 1936:53).

At the turn of the 1920s and 30s, Tuudur Vettik was one of those who tried to explain the idea behind the Song Celebrations more broadly, including the historical roots of the Song Celebration Movement. It is interesting to note that Vettik has been more honest and upfront here than the vast majority of the authors talking about the birth of the Estonian Song Celebrations. He was aware of and acknowledged the influence of the Baltic Germans on the national cultural life in Estonia, and did not try to ignore the pre-1869 song festivals. He wrote about the song festivals of the Baltic countries held in Kadriorg, Tallinn in 1857. It included choirs from Riga, Pärnu, Tartu, Narva, and Tallinn. He also wrote about the song festivals in Jõhvi in 1866, and Simuna in 1866. His description of the 1866 Tallinn German Song Festival is impressive (Vettik 1929:199–206). Vettik's attitude towards the predecessors of our national culture was frowned upon during the Soviet regime (when the Baltic Germans and their culture had to be regarded as enemies), and in many respects the latter still do not receive the respect they deserve today.

In the 1930s, the devaluation of the idea behind the Song Celebrations in the Estonian society was made worse by the attacks of cultural figures from other fields of art against the Song Celebrations. In many cases, there seems to be an underlying hope ‘of getting a bigger piece of the pie’. For example, the linguistic innovator Johannes Aavik thought that too many song festivals took place in Estonia, and that the money used to organise these would serve a much better purpose in developing the Estonian language, and creating new words. He thought that the “Estonian Song Celebrations promoted a culture of pleasure, frivolity, and sexual excess” (Aavik 1930:15–17).

Tuudur Vettik spoke up in favour of the Song Celebrations, saying that the envious were suffering from the disease of massive exaggeration if they thought that huge sums have been buried in promoting choir music; in reality, all this was based on the enthusiasm of those involved (Vettik 1931:7–12).

The Song Celebration Movement had reached its first crisis. To overcome it, someone with powerful leadership qualities, strong professionalism, and sense of mission was sorely needed.

### 2.3. Two important Song Celebrations for Vettik

The 11th Song Celebration in 1938 has been called Tuudur Vettik's Song Celebration. He was the Head Conductor, and conducted a dozen songs (Ojaveski et al. 2002:107). Next to the works of Mart Saar, Riho Päts, Artur Kapp, Cyrillus Kreek, and others, his own pieces were also performed. The combined mixed choirs sang Vettik's *Su põhjamaa päikese kullast*, which Vettik himself hoped would become the new anthem of the Republic of Estonia (Must 2008). Vettik was literally carried shoulder-high – he was the leading light of an important event that became the emotional culmination of the cultural history of the Republic of Estonia.

It was decided in 1939 that the next All-Estonian Song Celebration would take place on the 25th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, and Vettik was to become the Head Conductor of the 12th All-Estonian Song Celebration. He was overseeing the preparations: selecting the repertoire, printing of sheet music, and choir registration (Vettik 1942/2). At first it seemed that the Song Celebration could be organised despite the German occupation. Paradoxically, and regardless of the fact that the German occupation had already been replaced by the Soviet occupation, the 12th Song Celebration did indeed take place four years later, in 1947, with a minimal change in the programme.

Tuudur Vettik was again appointed its Artistic Director. Over 80% of the repertoire was made up of Estonian choir music, with only an odd song about the *great Stalin* or *the great Lenin* thrown in, which can be interpreted as paying the obligatory state dues. Unbelievable as it may sound, the 1947 Song Celebration, with Vettik still the leader of the Song Celebration Movement, was remarkably more patriotic than the Celebrations over the next fifty years, when resistance could only be read between the 'lines of music'.

Urve Lippus writes that the Estonian choir movement was indeed reborn at the 12th All-Estonian Song Celebration in 1947, under the leadership of the old leaders of the choir movement Tuudur Vettik (incontestably the most important authority in the choir movement at the time), Alfred Karindi, Riho Päts, and Gustav Ernesaks. She adds that the real reason behind punishing the head conductors of the Song Celebration was "the patriotic feeling of the masses that found manifestation during the Celebration" (Lippus 2008:192–193).

The time of Vettik as a sovereign leader of the Song Celebration Movement turned out to be short-lived, and came to an abrupt end. Vettik's success story was still going strong in 1947, when he received the title of a Merited Artist of the ESSR, and the press lauded Vettik as a man of wonderful music and temperament. His 50th birthday was celebrated in Estonia Concert Hall with a magnificent

concert on 4 January 1948.<sup>1</sup> He was already planning the 13th Song Celebration in 1950. Sadly, he fell from grace and was arrested by the Soviet occupation authorities on 18 February 1950.<sup>2</sup> The Song Celebration on 22nd and 23rd July 1950 has been remembered by the contemporaries as the most joyless one ever, and was purged of any mention of Vettik, or his songs.

### 3. Vettik's ascent to the leadership of the Song Celebration movement

The **first requirement for the leader** of the Song Celebration Movement was obviously that he had to be an exceptional choir conductor. By 1938, Vettik had quite a long experience in choir conducting – his career had begun as early as 1912, with the formation of a male and mixed choir from his fellow students at Väike-Maarja parish school. Vettik studied to become a professional conductor in the Conservatoire under Artur Kapp, and later (1927–1932) privately with Mart Saar. Tuudur Vettik was also strongly influenced by interactions with his close companions Riho Päts and Evald Aav. Even during his years in the Conservatoire, Vettik began to attract attention as a talented choir conductor. Alfred Karindi commented on Vettik's "infallible musical instinct, wonderful high temperament, consistency, high standards, and resolute spirit" (Karindi 1947:18–19). Gustav Ernesaks wrote in his memoirs: "Vettik's conducting style was energetic, even aggressive, he worked at a formidable pace which inevitably swept you up. His laconic, sharp, perceptive remarks rang out, and no arguments were tolerated" (Ernesaks 1980:86). Mart Saar saw Vettik's strong conductor nerve and outstanding talent in choir conducting. Saar pointed to the requisite ability of a choir conductor to not only keep the voice types together musically, but also "it is necessary for the choir to find encouragement in its own singing, be exhilarated, and thus become a single instrument in the competent hands of an artist/interpreter – the choir conductor. [...] He is a great figure in Song Celebrations," concluded Mart Saar<sup>3</sup> with conviction.

The second precondition that made Vettik the leader of the Song Celebration Movement was his fruitful work in training choir conductors. In a 1929 issue of the musical journal *Muusikaleht*, he gave community choirs detailed methodical guidelines on interpreting music; he later continued this work both when touring the Estonian counties, as well as via the All-Estonian Song Celebration newsletter. Vettik discussed the articulation and diction of songs, and terms and methods of melodic composition, rhythm, and dynamics. His suggestions differed from those of the other Head Conductors by their detailed and well-thought-out strong methodical nature (Vettik 1929:330–334). His didactic abilities and progressive-

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<sup>1</sup> ERA.R-130-1-6465. [Letters congratulating Tuudur Vettik on his 50th birthday from the Tallinn State Conservatoire and the ESSR State Philharmonics].

<sup>2</sup> ERAF, 130-1-6465. L 4–5 [arrest warrant No 166 of the ESSR State Security Ministry]. 18 February 1950.

<sup>3</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/155. L 18-27. [Handwritten notes on Tuudur Vettik by Mart Saar].

ness in finding new teaching methods were remarkable – in addition to publishing his teachings in print he also gave radio lessons, a novel idea at the time. He was a great publicist, song festival historian, and defender of the idea of Song Celebrations in media discussions.

Tuudur Vettik taught music at Westholm School. Many of his students later became accomplished musicians: Boris Kõrver, Aarne Oit, Naan Põld, Endel Lippus, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Vettik founded the Chair of Musical Conducting in the State Conservatoire, and was its first Head in 1940–1946. This appointment was another reflection of how Vettik had become the major authority on Estonian choir music, and still could not be bypassed for promotion even for ideological reasons. In 1946–47, Vettik was a Dean, and since 1947, professor of choir conducting. Tuudur Vettik became the founder of a school of professional choir conducting. His students included Roland Laasmäe, Ants Kiilaspea, Arno Kallikorm, Roman Toi, Alma Tamm, August Lüüs, Aita Teder, Voldemar Rumessen (father of pianist and political figure Vardo Rumessen), Aksel Pajupuu, Ülo Pajur, Hugo Kruusmann, Eda Aulis-Kõrgemägi, Uuno Taremaa, Ants Üleoja, and many others who worked as music teachers, choir conductors, and musical figures for years.

Even after returning from his forced exile in Siberia, Vettik continued to explain the methodical performance of music in his correspondence with his students<sup>5</sup>, thus developing a kind of ‘correspondence school’.

The third precondition for the growing authority of Tuudur Vettik was his activity as a composer. In total, he wrote nearly four hundred pieces to mixed, male, female, and children’s choirs, as well as solo songs, and violin, piano, and orchestra pieces. His choir production includes nearly two hundred titles. Mart Saar, the most renowned author of choir music in Estonia in the 1930s describes Vettik’s work: “Vettik’s work echoes the grieving of the whole Nordic wilderness, and the unrequited yearning for something unattainable; the boundless worried loneliness of deep forests hums in his works.”<sup>6</sup>

Aadu Must describes Tuudur Vettik – the 40-years-old founder of the Estonian school of choir conductors in 1938 – as one of the most “temperamental and most outstanding representatives of the younger generation of Estonian choir conductors”, while Vettik’s contemporaries described his work as the “more singable part of Estonian choir literature” (Must 2008).

The songs of Tuudur Vettik are characterised by an in-depth knowledge of choir specifics; they are marked by a unique, folklore steeped, strong individual handwriting, and a characteristic cool Nordic tone. Artur Kapp says that Vettik creates “beautiful songs both in idea as well as musical format. Sometimes rough, but also in a soft, sentimental expression. [...] Clear thought process, refinement, and love for music” (Kapp 1931:290). Many of his choir songs, such as *Nokturn*,

<sup>4</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/97. L 48.

<sup>5</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/112; 116. [Tuudur Vettik’s correspondence with Roland Laasmäe and other students].

<sup>6</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/155. L 18-27.

*Kuu, Su Põhjamaa päikese kullast, Põhjamaa lapsed* have remained in the concert programmes of our choirs.

The fourth important field where Vettik demonstrated his diversity and made his strong contribution to the development of the Estonian choir culture was his serious work on song lyrics. He has written the lyrics to about thirty of his own melodies (sometimes under the aliases of A. Saarik, A. Ennok, E. Kõrend, etc). From a purely *poetic* point of view, his lyrics are not of the highest quality. But this changes immediately and dramatically if we assess these as *choir music lyrics*. Vettik's lyrics are an organic part of the choir songs; in synergy with the music created for them, they result in masterly choir songs. Vettik himself has said that the most *valuable asset* of choir lyrics was the melodic consonants, because these give a variety of melodic effects, rhythmic and harmonious reflections, and magnificent sound combinations (Vettik 1939:186).

All the great figures of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement of the 21st century whom I have had the opportunity to interview describe Vettik as a talented choir conductor, and an extraordinary teacher (but also an extremely controversial personality). But they all agree on one thing: Vettik was the sovereign leader of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement in the 1930s and 40s (Randjärv 2012:150–226).

#### 4. Vettik's intellectual resistance to occupation authorities

The Estonian nation sees the Song Celebration Movement as a vessel and a protector of its national ambitions and freedoms, a passive resistance to the ideological pressure of foreign authorities. This is why the personal views, integrity, and civil courage of the leaders of the Song Celebration Movement are particularly important to us. Did they fulfil their obligation by remaining true to their people, or did they cooperate with foreign authorities? Major or minor accusations in collaboration have been made against a number of the leaders of the Song Celebration Movement: Jannsen, Vettik, as well as Ernesaks.

To illustrate and explain this claim, I will first focus on the story of Vettik's cantata *Surematus* (Immortality), written to the lyrics of Mart Raud. The very fact that a cantata was written in honour of Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Communist Party, could be interpreted as an attempt to please the Communist regime. In reality, however, things were not that simple. An article by Mart Raud in an April 1947 issue of the newspaper *Rahva Hääl* accused Vettik of at least formalism and inability to serve the Soviet propaganda, if not of outright anti-Soviet music production. Mart Raud unmasked Vettik as the person who butchered his poem in memory of the Great Lenin, had killed the poet's attempt of declaring the immortality of Lenin's ideas. Raud viewed this as a warning example in the cultural life. "The idea behind my poem – the immortal power – was turned completely upside down in the music. The composer lulls the last line of the poem

on the truth and power of the idea of Lenin into the quietest whisper through his formalist harmonies,” the poet moaned (Raud 1947).

The basics of source research say that instead of researching the secondary information on a phenomenon, i.e. various descriptions and assessments, we should research the phenomenon itself, if given the possibility. In this case, the primary information is the melodic language of the cantata. My musical background made this analysis a true intellectual delight for me.

A close inspection of the work leaves no doubt that Vettik’s semantic marks do indeed offer multiple interpretations; however, the dominant message changes the diligent pathos of the text considerably.

The song is mostly in a light-hearted G major. The beginning rests on triads but the intro ends by a root with an additional sound – a sixth that gives the impression of the simultaneous sounding of the minor and the major. The joyful tone continues over the lines *’kuid kindlamalt kui sesse kivipinda, on raiatud ta nimi rahva rinda’* [‘but more securely than in this stony surface his name has been carved in the hearts of the people’] and moves in an exceptionally high tessitura, sung in high pitch tenor, and even with an intentional screech at the end of the phrase. The dynamic features include an opposing idea over the words *’mõte tões ja jõus’* [‘thought in truth and strength’], when *morendo*, or dying, has been planned in the music. Yet the song is titled *Surematus* (Immortality). At the end of the song, there is a long monotonous motif *’Suur sõna Lenin’* [‘great word Lenin’] sung by low register bases as if from behind the grave, and a separately syllabicated text *’mau-so-le-u-mi graniidirahus’* [‘in the granite peace of the mausoleum’]. This syllabication of the word, which contrasts with everyday speech, serves to further emphasise the unnatural character of the feeling that the poet Raud had attempted to form into a *noble* idea. In addition, Vettik adds a text to the end of the song that Raud did not have. And even though the text says *’olgu rahu’* [‘let there be peace’], the melody and the dynamics give the impression of a *’rest in peace’*.

The melodic language of the work caused discussions among musicians even at the time of its completion. Linda Bachmann-Kallikorm<sup>1</sup>, a student at the time, described how *’it ended with the phrase ‘puhka rahu’ that could be interpreted as a funeral eulogy to Lenin instead of a praise, and got Vettik in trouble* (the actual wording is *’olgu rahu’* but because of the melody it really sounds like the *’rest in peace’* we all know from funerals). This proves that Mart Raud did not get excited without a reason – Vettik’s plan to send the audience a message that completely opposed that of the poem, and was far from an apotheosis, was indeed realised. Everyone with sufficient musical literacy received a simple and clear message: this work had not been created to praise Lenin – the musical language was steeped in grotesque and irony, it expressed covert resistance.

Naturally, the message was understood in exactly the same manner by the composers and choir conductors living in exile, Harri Kiisk, and others of the Vettik school (Rebas 2016:138).

Similar intellectual resistance was widely spread within the Song Celebration Movement during the years of Soviet annexation, and found an expression in things like hiding the Estonian national colours or historical national symbols within the obligatory Soviet posters and images, placing double entendre messages on placards, or singing songs in the Song Celebration parade that did not respect the Soviet ideology<sup>7</sup> (Ojaveski 2002).

## 5. National memory

With his arrest, Vettik became an ‘enemy of the people’, and his name had to be erased from history. He could not be mentioned in print, or over the radio. This mission was a complete success, and restoring Vettik to his rightful place in the Estonian cultural history has not been easy.

‘Writing Vettik out of history’ was made relatively easy by the fact that no monograph or review of his life or work had been published by the time he was imprisoned. Why was that?

According to the press of the 1920s and 30s, Vettik was a very important cultural figure of the time, and a great number of interesting articles were published about him. The music journal *Muusikaleht* was a particularly important publication. Its pages present Vettik as a significant figure in the descriptions and reviews of a range of musical events, and overviews of the Song Celebration Movement. He also left a strong mark through this publication as a music critic, choir conductor, and teacher, introducer of the methodical basis of choir music theory, protector of the Song Celebration Movement, and a cultural figure. Sadly, these numerous valuable fragments of information have not been combined into a systematic overview. ‘Writing out of history’ has been technically much easier in the case of the cultural figures who had not been the subject of published biographies before their arrest, as opposed to the luminaries whose life’s work had already been ‘enshrined in a book’.

In 1940, when Estonia was occupied, Tuudur Vettik was only 42 years old, and it must clearly have been too early to talk about a summary of his life’s work. Books are not written about people who are at the height of their creative energy, and are expected to still do great deeds. In the 1950s, he was however already a *persona non grata*, which in the Soviet conditions meant that he would be consciously and systematically removed from the official narrative.

Until very recently, no one had even checked the landmark dates of Vettik’s biography; his birth date and place are still given incorrectly in reference works. The encyclopaedic data gives the Maestro’s birth date as 4 January 1898 in Uniküla near Väike-Maarja. The church metric books, however, say that Tuudur Vettik, born under the name of Feodor Fabian Wettik, was born on 22 December

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<sup>7</sup> Recollections of Mall Johanson to the author on 23 January 2012.

1897 of the old calendar, at 3 a.m. in Nadalama village on the estate of Pudivere.<sup>8</sup> According to the new calendar, the correct date is January 3 – and not January 4 – 1898. This one day difference is caused by the frequent mistake when converting the dates of the old calendar.<sup>9</sup> The mistake on the place of birth is also understandable – Uniküla was the childhood home of the future composer where the family moved soon after his birth. And yet, ‘childhood home’ and ‘birth place’ are not interchangeable concepts.

Here are some episodes from the life of Vettik to illustrate the mechanism of ‘writing *personae non gratae* out of history’. The anniversary book of the Tallinn State Conservatoire was published in 1969, co-written by cultural figures in favour with the Soviet authorities. The book makes no mention of the work of Tuudur Vettik as a professor, head of chair, and founder of a choir conducting school – the book only talks about the students of Gustav Ernesaks and Jüri Variste. Vettik decided to set the records straight and published an article in *Õhtuleht*, where he kindly referred to the ‘forgotten’ facts.<sup>10</sup> (Vettik 1969). Even more important is Vettik’s letter to the author of this part of the book Jüri Variste, where he disapproved of Variste’s systematic self-aggrandisement, and distortion of the historical truth. “Sentence: The Chair of Choir Conducting was founded in 1944. It makes me wonder why a leading professor and Head of Chair does not know the history of his institution’. The letter to Variste ends with a clear and forceful demand. ‘Those written statements of yours that I am contesting here are erroneous, and disregard my accomplishments. This is where I cannot stay indifferent. I remain in waiting for your response’.<sup>11</sup> He waited in vain.

Another evocative episode that illustrates the Soviet habit of attributing the achievements of the *personae non gratae* to the favourites is connected to the story of the construction of the Tallinn Song Celebration stage. Vettik worked for decades for the Song Celebration stage. As early as 1928, he wrote in a review of Song Celebrations that the main protagonists beside the choirs were the sun, the rain, and the wind, and described how the wind carried away the *piano* notes before they reached the audience (Vettik 1928:205). In 1947, Vettik published a programmatic article *Song Festival Grounds and Stages* which explained the acoustic problems of open air concerts, and analysed the impact of the location, design, and architectural peculiarities of the sites on the effect of the singers and

<sup>8</sup> EAA. 1229-1-173:245 [EELC Simuna congregation birth records for 1897]; 1232-1-247:101 [EELC Väike-Maarja congregation personal records], EAA. 3585-1-92, 1 105–106 [population list of Pudivere rural municipality 1885–1910].

<sup>9</sup> This is a repeat conversion mistake in personal records. At the beginning of the 20th century, one had to add 13 days to the dates of the old calendar to get the new calendar date. People often forget that only 12 days instead of 13 have to be added to 19th century dates.

<sup>10</sup> See also ETMM, M 347:1/50. L 32-37. [Letter by Tuudur Vettik to Jüri Variste on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Tallinn State Conservatoire] 1969].

<sup>11</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/50. L 32-37. [Letter by Tuudur Vettik to professor Jüri Variste in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Tallinn State Conservatoire in 1969] Professor Kuno Areng remembers that the relations between Vettik and Variste were very bad, with both occasionally making snide remarks about each other in public.

the concert.<sup>12</sup> In 1957, after returning from the prison camp, Vettik again declared in a newspaper article that Estonia needed a new Song Celebration stage. ‘*We need a roof over the stage! A full roof! This is the first and foremost requirement!*’ Vettik declared (Vettik 1957).

Vettik had also chosen the exact location for the song stage of his dreams. This was on the slope of Lasnamäe, where the stage was in fact constructed. In his mind’s eye, he saw high trees on both sides of the boiler shaped song festival grounds. In the future, this park was to include busts of composers and conductors of the festival. “That would be the history of our Song Celebrations,” Vettik sighed. The ideas of a bourgeois nationalist freshly back from Siberia did not merit attention during the Soviet era, and have indeed been ‘written out of the history’. The honour for the authorship and promotion of the idea was attributed by the propaganda apparatus fully to Gustav Ernesaks. I do not wish to belittle any of the well-earned respect for Gustav Ernesaks because he undoubtedly had an important positive role in the story of the new stage. All the available methods had to be used to find ways of ensuring national culture and development in the conditions of Soviet annexation. Thanks to Ernesaks’s tenacity, the stage was indeed built. Had he not stepped into the spot left empty after Vettik’s removal from the leadership of the Song Celebration Movement, we might very probably be talking about the Movement as a purely historical phenomenon.

This is the dialectic feature of the period. Ernesaks had access to the power corridors where the former political prisoner Vettik was not allowed.

It was with great interest that I read the book on Estonian history by Seppo Zetterberg. Its cover depicts Miina Härma on the conductor’s rostrum of the 9th All-Estonian Song Celebration. This voluminous and fascinating book included no mention of Tuudur Vettik. I was even less happy with the description of the pre-WWII music life, and the 1938 All-Estonian Song Celebration in the 4th volume of the Estonian history published in Estonia (Pajur et al. 2005:127). It mentioned several illustrious Estonian composers (Eduard Tubin, Artur Kapp, Evald Aav). In the description of the 1938 Song Celebration, Gustav Ernesaks is *imported* as its Head Conductor instead of Tuudur Vettik, although Ernesaks took over from Vettik much later, and in completely different circumstances. The most important man of the festival of the Estonian nation, the Artistic Director of the 11th All-Estonian Song Celebration Tuudur Vettik was not even mentioned (Pajur et al. 2005:127). I am not using these examples to criticise the authors or editors of these truly high-quality reference works. Large scale reference books are always based on earlier studies, and edited mercilessly. But I cannot help but see here the reflection of the blind spot around Vettik, a legacy of the Soviet era studies. It is our obligation to fill in the blanks.

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<sup>12</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/58. L 1-11. [Manuscript by Tuudur Vettik on song festival grounds and stages. “Lauluväljakud ja laululavad”], 1947.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I must highlight that the Song Celebrations that were considered an important part of the Estonian national identity cannot be viewed narrowly as a sequence of great musical events. Instead, they were part of the consistent, methodical, and comprehensive preservation and development of the traditions of our national culture both in Estonia as well as in our diaspora. This process includes the preparation periods between the Celebrations, as well as the internal life of the choirs, and external socio-historical processes. One of the pivotal events of the Song Celebration Movement from the social point of view was the Singing Revolution of the 1980s, when vocal music acquired the power of a weapon in the freedom fight of the Estonian nation.

We cannot get a full picture of the Song Celebration Movement without including the Estonian diaspora. The traditional direction of the Song Celebration Movement, which had formed during national independence, was continued by the Estonians living in exile.

This article concentrated on Tuudur Vettik, who was a remarkable choir conductor, teacher, theoretician of choir music, composer, author of lyrics, ideologist, protector, and trendsetter of the Song Celebration Movement, and an all-round organiser. All these facets closely connected and in strong synergy made Vettik the leader of the Song Celebration Movement.

Admittedly, the sidelining of Vettik was of momentous socio-political importance, by which the foreign authorities hoped to wreak massive damage on the Estonian cultural life, and break the old traditions. Luckily for us, they did not succeed, and thanks to the proponents of the Song Celebration Movement, and choir conductors (a considerable part of whom were students of Tuudur Vettik), the Movement managed to survive the occupations, and the Soviet annexation.

The history of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement is largely a topic that has not been thoroughly researched, and needs the contribution of the next generation of determined historians. Many of its secrets are also hidden in Russian archives. I hope that this fascinating and yet largely undiscovered subject is taken up actively by the historians of the next generation. The further we move away from the period of annexation and the creative figures of the time, the less painful it becomes to dispassionately study this period that is so full of contradictions and offers opportunities for multiple interpretations.

To conclude, I second the proposal of Hain Rebas that the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds deserve monuments to other great figures of the Song Celebration Movement, including those who worked in the Estonian diaspora, next to the existing one to Gustav Ernesaks. I believe that there should be a monument to Tuudur Vettik, the great figure of the Estonian Song Celebration Movement on the Song Festival Grounds, or elsewhere.

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