

# EXPO

The Lithuanian Song Celebration, a week-long festival of music, dance and choral singing, brings together thousands of performers, from ensembles to conductors, often decked out in traditional dress.

Monocle travels to the Baltic state for the centenary edition to find out why the giant jamboree helps keep the country singing from the same hymn sheet.

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# NATION IN HARMONY



In the car park next to Vilnius’s Twinsbet arena, boys and girls in their finest attire are balancing instruments under their arms and looking over laminated sheets of Lithuanian marching music. It’s not long before everyone is due on stage and, over at a nearby catering tent, more musicians are loading up on pancakes, yoghurt and fruit. Alongside amateur youth groups from all over Lithuania, tonight’s concert also features the Baltic state’s professional military bands. Egle Juciute, dressed in a blue-and-red 18th-century-style uniform complete with gold-trim trousers, has been playing in Lithuania’s Military Orchestra for 14 years, an ensemble normally dispatched to welcome international dignitaries. “It’s a responsibility to be here and to play,” she says, flute in hand. Crowds have gathered to watch and the show is beamed around the country via the state TV broadcaster.

The wind-and-brass band evening is just one event in a huge, week-long extravaganza known as the Song Celebration, which takes place every four years. The event, which marks its centenary this year and is also observed by neighbouring Latvia and Estonia, is recognised on Unesco’s lists of intangible cultural heritage. It is known for the staggering number of participants; in Lithuania’s case, 37,000 performers are taking part this year.

Tonight’s concert, introduced to the repertoire just over a decade ago, is an acquiescence to the growing popularity of brass bands. Under the bright lights of the indoor basketball arena, there is a mishmash of outfits, including a group of young children dressed in black, complete with yellow rain boots, who run onto the stage as bands play behind them. Primed, prepped and beaming, there are barefoot girls in flower headdresses and others in red tartan who are shaking pom-poms, making it feel a little like a US beauty pageant.

But it’s a piece of music set to a video and shown on a screen behind the stage that gets to the heart of what the Song Celebration is all about. It shows the Baltic Way – the peaceful, pan-Baltic human-chain protest that was staged against Soviet occupation in 1989. It stretched for hundreds of kilometres and was part of the “Singing Revolution”. Rich in symbols and symbolism, it’s a chance for independent, democratic Lithuania to get misty-eyed and in touch with its history. To finish the night, everyone gathers for a final rendition of “Kur giria zaliuoja” – an unofficial anthem that mentions Lithuania stretching “as long as the river flows” – as the night’s TV presenters put their arms around each other and sway, one of them gesturing that she has goose bumps.

The self-reflection reaches fever pitch on the last two days, when everyone dons traditional dress. First there is the football-stadium dance performance which, at one point, has 9,000 people linking arms and moving in lines and circles on the pitch at the same time. Some of the people streaming into the stadium at speed occasionally lose the grip of the dance companion next to them, causing a panic to catch and rejoin the chain. The event culminates with song night, which features several hundred choirs and 12,000 people lined up in rows on an open-air stage that was custom-built in 1960 in wooded parkland. The same stage also stands in Estonia’s capital, Tallinn. The music is often traditional and folkloric but there is also space for new compositions, which often reference Lithuania’s pagan past.

During one of the choir rehearsals for what proves to be a dizzying organisational and choreographic set piece, Saulius Liausa – choir conductor and the director of the Lithuanian National Culture Centre, which runs the Song Celebration – plants an oak tree on the edge of woodland near the stage. Ripe with symbolism, it’s designed to tie in with this year’s theme, which is “May the green forest grow”. As people take turns to shovel earth around the sapling, one heralds Lithuania’s independence while another salutes the young generation and the hope that they might sing the same way for another 100 years.

Liausa says that in a small country like Lithuania, with a population of about 2.8 million, it’s essential to safeguard culture. “We have all kinds of laws and documents to protect nature,” he says. “But what we sometimes forget is that culture is also a fragile thing that needs protecting and that’s what we want to draw attention to.” He says that there are hundreds of customs and traditions that have been lost. And the Soviet past, in which the Song Celebration was hijacked by the occupiers, is still fresh in memories and painfully brought back to the surface by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. “The wars that are happening in the world, Ukraine included, are about culture,” he says. “It’s language and culture that people are fighting for, not money or land as such. What we’re seeing in Ukraine – and what we also think here in Lithuania – is that a nation that really loves its culture and itself is very, very difficult to defeat.”

Given that view, it’s not surprising that the state plays such a top-down role. The celebration, which costs about €5m, is paid for by the country, with almost every procurement going out to tender; the provider offering the lowest cost wins. The price of helping to support a year-round







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*Previous spread*

1. Folk celebrations in Kalnai Park

*This spread*

1. Performer at the football-stadium dance day  
2. Procession from Cathedral Square during the final day of festivities









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*Previous spread*

1. Choreographed dancing

*This spread*

1. Lithuanians from the US enjoy a tippie  
2. Lithuanian Air Force Band member ready to take the stage





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1. Traditional dress at dance day
2. Clarinet player from Palanga
3. Backstage at dance day
4. Young dancer waiting his turn

5. Saulius Liausa, director of the Lithuanian National Culture Centre
6. Getting ready at the makeshift hotel in the Vilnius Liepkalnis School
7. Music teacher and conductor Rimantas Jocys
8. At the dance day's evening performance





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1. Backstage at the Twinsbet arena
2. Much-needed break ahead of the final performance at Vingis Park stadium
3. Collective from Chicago in Vilnius's Town Hall Square
4. Many young people like to take part in the folk celebrations





1. Mega-choir on the last evening of the Song Celebration

ecosystem of dance and song clubs around the country, where people practise the repertoire, is harder to estimate but it needs support. While performer numbers have managed to stay stable, the number of music groups has been declining, even if the membership within those remaining is growing.

Alongside the culture ministry, education, internal affairs and foreign affairs all play a part. Municipalities send delegates and help parents to chaperone groups of children, as well as providing buses to get people to the capital. The state spends €1.1m on keeping bellies full, dishing out 250,000 portions of food, and it turns schools into accommodation, which become makeshift encampments for a week.

MONOCLE visits Vilnius Liepkalnis School, where more than 200 children and adults, mostly from Pasvalys, a city near the Latvian border, are either playing basketball outside, resting on green camp beds or reapplying make-up ahead of the evening's celebrations. Ruta Jaruseviciene, from the municipality, shows us around. Remarkably, given the number of people temporarily living here, all is going smoothly, she says, even though six children came down with a mysterious vomiting bug the day before. Jaruseviciene offers us home-brew from several kegs in the makeshift bedrooms (the Pasvalys flag features a bull and hops in a nod to its beer tradition), while someone else is soon proffering a plate of *lasiniai* – seasoned and smoked pork served in slices. “I thought that the children would be tired after a full day,” says Jaruseviciene. “But they eat and then go wild!”

During the dance day, performers pack into a backstage area to sit on rugs or pass out under the sun from the excitement and exertion. A German flag tacked to net fencing and a sign for the Chicago Suktinis – a dance troupe made up of Lithuanian American teenagers – point to the 2,000 performers from Lithuania's diaspora who flock back to the motherland to be a part of this mass showing of collective memory. After the show, MONOCLE meets a dance group from Scotland, which includes an Indian with no link to Lithuania and an Argentine called Santiago Markus from Berisso in Buenos Aires province, whose grandfather is the son of Lithuanian immigrants. “It's something I do to represent him,” he says of his second Song Celebration.

Milling in the crowds is Simonas Kairys, Lithuania's culture minister, who is dressed in a traditional shirt from Dzūkija in the south of the country. The minister calls himself a liberal and a globalist but he says that it's important

to show where you're from. So, given the messaging and what can be seen as an interventionist approach towards culture, is this a political event? “Visit the Venice Biennale and you'll see how art is affected by current events,” says Kairys. “This isn't political but it's the basis of statehood, humanity, a peaceful world. When you're singing, you're not fighting with somebody.”

Some have reservations about elements of the Song Celebration, which are clearly designed to rouse the nation. “Too much is made of nationalism,” says Nerija Putinaite, associate professor at the Vilnius University Institute of Political Sciences. “The focus should be on civic, not ethnic identity.” Still, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the crowd, from cheering family members to someone who has travelled here from abroad, who isn't overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the event, which has an atmosphere that often verges on the euphoric.

By the time the last night of celebrations approaches, the mood is festive, with people tucking into sausages from food stalls and sipping beer or *kvas*, a sweet malt drink. Choir music – including catchy numbers such as “Zmones ant kalnu” (“People on top of hills”), conducted by one of the evening's 31 conductors, all greeted like rock stars – can be heard well past midnight. The thousands of choral members are visibly elated, pleased to have eyes on them. On several occasions, a Mexican wave sweeps through the choir, with songs often finished with a collective ripple of jazz hands. The crowd responds, some singing along, raising phones where once there would have been lighters and enthusiastically applauding.

To arrive at the stadium, the performers had assembled in Vilnius's Cathedral Square and walked for several kilometres in a giant procession – often accompanied by more brass bands. They were waved on by people lining the streets, some of whom were perched on grass embankments to get a better view. Inside the park just before the clearing where the stadium stands, Micheline Beniusis is sitting on a bench, wearing a lilac dress, with a crown of flowers in her hair. Born in Montréal to Lithuanian parents, she is in her late eighties, which doesn't seem to get in the way of her flying over to join what is a physically demanding event alongside three grandchildren and two nephews.

“It's very deep-rooted,” she says of the festivities, as the procession stream past her. And then her group of maple-leaf flag-wavers arrives, a sea of lilac and flowers, ready to pick her up to join the night's mega-choir. She's off with a wave of her hand – ready to belt her heart out in the name of Lithuania. — (M)





1. Tired but happy

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