

Video 22

The Songs and the Symphonies of the Renaissance

But what about *music*? Aren't we going to have some music as we march toward the sea to pick up a handful of salt? Aren't we going to have some music as we walk with umbrellas in the rain along the sidewalks while the empty buses roll by? Aren't we going to have some music when the fools put us in jail?

Every old hippy—like your teacher—remembers the rich and powerful music that amplified our lives—making our lives larger, a part of the world—during the 1960s and early 1970s. The Beatles poured out music that brightened our world. Simon and Garfunkle poured out music that probed the troubled soul of our world. Mick Jagger taunted us by speaking as the Devil himself, forcing us to confront our unrelenting evil. Janis Joplin sang about loneliness on the American highway, and in the American heart. Harry Belafonte sang with the anguished voice of the despairing Negro, (and quietly funded Martin Luther King and several major events in the Civil Rights Movement).

Jimi Hendrix took the American National Anthem and made it scream from his electric guitar . . . at Woodstock in 1969, and in American military bases in Viet Nam, where young black soldiers were fighting a pointless and criminal war while the American police were beating black civil rights marchers back home in Birmingham and Selma.

Yes, the crowds in the Salt March sang their songs in Hindu while they marched toward the sea. And the Negroes locked up in crowded jails throughout the American South sang their spirituals and freedom songs. Today, Native Americans protesting the construction of oil pipelines through their sacred land vibrantly confront the industrial aggression with the beating of ancient drums.

And rap, the bold, angry, urgent poetry of the street, now speaks in a growing number of languages around the world.

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Young People of the World, do you know about the Singing Revolution in the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, during the four years between

1987 and 1991? These three small countries had been occupied by various larger countries for roughly 800 years. During World War Two, they were occupied first by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany, then again by the Soviet Union. In 1945, while Western Europe celebrated the end of the war, the Baltic States, like several other countries in Eastern Europe, remained occupied by Soviet military forces.

The three Baltic countries had been independent from foreign rule during most of the years between World War One and World War Two. To be occupied again, decade after decade, from the 1940s to the 1980s, was an especially bitter experience.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow, with the hope of reforming the stagnant Soviet economy. The new atmosphere encouraged the Baltic peoples to move, step by step, toward independence. In Estonia (which I have visited and know best), a few Estonians demonstrated in the spring of 1987 against a proposed phosphate mining project near their capital city of Tallinn. The peaceful demonstration was *not* dispersed by Soviet soldiers and tanks; Moscow did not seem to notice.

On August 23, 1987, thousands of people from throughout the country assembled in Tallinn to denounce the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August, 1939 (just before World War Two began), an agreement in which Hitler handed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to Stalin, in return for, first of all, Poland. The three independent countries had been swallowed once again.

In April of 1988, during a large demonstration in the university town of Tartu, Estonian flags with horizontal blue, black and white stripes appeared above the crowd, for the first time since 1940.

And then in June of 1988, a hundred thousand Estonians gathered at Tallinn's outdoor theater for a song festival. A huge concrete concert shell, which cupped a broad stage of rising steps, faced an enormous sloping lawn. The tilted stage could hold a chorus of thirty thousand singers. The audience, seated on the grass, was able to look beyond the stage at the blue Gulf of Finland behind it.

When the singing began, thousands of singers on the stage, amplified by the huge shell behind them, sent their voices out to an audience that knew the words to every song. No Russian folk tunes this time. No Soviet marching songs. These songs were purely Estonian, sung in the Estonian language. The voice of the enormous chorus, the vibrant voice of thousands of brave people, sent verse after verse, song after song, through the hearts of a hundred thousand listeners. People stood up on the huge lawn and sang with tears running down their cheeks.

Similar festivals took place in Latvia and Lithuania, where people bravely sang their own songs in their own languages. The Baltic peoples stood up to the threat of Soviet tanks with their Singing Revolution. Moscow, embroiled in the disastrous war in Afghanistan, barely noticed.

On August 23, 1989—on the 50th anniversary of the hated Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—the peoples of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania held hands across their three countries in a chain of people 675 kilometers long. People carried small radios and thus knew when to link hands from Tallinn to Riga to Vilnius. At that moment in history, the peoples of the Baltic, feeling a deep pride in their three cultures, and an enormous power in their unity, demanded their freedom from the Soviet Union.

Throughout 1989, 1990 and 1991, they kept singing in their festivals. Rock bands sang revolutionary songs, while the audience sang along with them.

On November 9, 1989, authorities in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) announced that their citizens could pass through the Wall into West Berlin and West Germany. Crowds of East Germans immediately passed through the open gates into West Germany, where, joining crowds of jubilant West Germans, they celebrated their freedom.

During the following months, the hated Wall, which had divided the German people since 1961, was finally and peacefully torn down. The two parts of Germany were unified into one country on October 3, 1990.

The world had changed. People began to believe that perhaps . . . the Cold War had ended.

On March 11, 1990, Lithuania declared its independence.

On January 13, 1991, Soviet soldiers killed Lithuanian citizens in Vilnius, and thereby threatened every measure of progress so far.

On March 3, 1991, Estonians voted in a referendum on the question of independence: 78 percent voted Yes. Those who voted No were Russians living in Estonia, Russians with no home in Russia to go home to.

On August 19, 1991, a Communist coup in Moscow caused a brief period of turmoil.

The next day, August 20, 1991, while Russian tanks fired on the Russian parliament, Estonians declared themselves to be citizens of an independent nation.

The next day, August 21, Latvia also declared itself independent.

On the next day, August 22, Iceland recognized both Estonia and Latvia.

On the next day, August 23, Denmark recognized the three new Baltic nations.

On August 27, Norway and Sweden recognized the three new Baltic nations.

On August 29, Sweden opened an embassy in Tallinn.

On September 2, the United States recognized the three new Baltic nations.

On September 6, the Soviet Union quietly acknowledged the three declarations of independence.

And on September 17, 1991, all three Baltic nations joined the United Nations.

No doubt they were singing on that historic day.

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Young People of the World, we await your songs, from every country and every culture around the world.

We await your symphonies, filled with the beauty and the power of your vision.

Thank you.

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John Slade