

## Memories of St. Olaf's Church musician's as the sources for writing music history and as the reflections of cultural memory

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Since one of the ideological bases of the Soviet Union was atheism, church activity, including musical life in Estonia, was officially restricted and obstructed throughout the Soviet occupation (1945–circa 1990). In actual fact, musical life in church was characterized by a dual life and a constant testing of the borders between the permitted and the forbidden. Those circumstances render the endeavour of finding reliable sources when studying the history of church music during the Soviet period rather problematic, and the reading of those materials requires a critical approach. Official sources (e.g. the Communist party and official documentation) do not adequately reflect what really took place, while the documents and notations of the congregations themselves are insufficient or absent altogether. In this light, the memories of members of congregations and church musicians become important – perhaps even the most valuable sources for studying and writing about the history of church music in the period.

In this article the issue of how the memories of church musicians reflect the musical life of the 1950s and 1960s was explored using the example of Estonia's largest free church, St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn (founded in 1950). The memoirs were written by approximately one hundred people and mostly during the years 2009–2011. The authors of the memoirs are people with first-hand experience. Therefore, it must firstly be acknowledged that the time of writing the memoirs is about half a century more recent than the time of the events being recalled. It is equally important to observe the difference between the social and political contexts of the period being described and the period during which the descriptions were written.

The writings of church musicians were examined mainly with regard to two aspects: as important (but largely neglected) sources of Estonian music history of the first decades of the Soviet period, and as the reflections of the cultural memory of the little community of memory – the free church of Estonia.

The first part of the article provides a description of the historical situation during the Stalinist and the Khrushchev periods: the events (music in church services and semi-legal church concerts; the repertoire and activity of choirs) and values that are mentioned in the memoirs and considered significant. Describing church music life in connection to music practices outside the church, some intriguing aspects can be outlined. The first one is connected to the pressures of the Soviet regime during the different stages of the occupation period. If the Stalinist years were the most restrictive and repressive in terms of public musical culture, it appears that in St. Olaf's Church there was an active music life, with two big choirs and an orchestra performing large-scale classical sacred music works throughout the period. The only opportunity in the 1950s to hear Bach's *Weihnachtsoratorium* or his Passions or Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* or Mendelssohn's *Paulus* was to go to the "semi-legal" concerts that took place under the title of musical services at St. Olaf's Church. The following Khrushchev period has been generally called the *Thaw*. In church music, however, it was almost the opposite: Khrushchev began a forcible anti-religion campaign, which brought with it far greater restrictions than in the preceding years. In the period 1960–63, all musical instruments were banned from the church, except for the organ used to accompany the congregation's singing; it was forbidden to perform large-scale musical works or to visit other churches, etc. Adherence to the restrictions and rules was rigorously controlled; musicians connected to the church were not allowed to continue their studies, they were fired from their jobs, etc. Church music life, which until then had been able to adapt and find its courses of action under the conditions of the earlier Soviet regime, was nearly extinguished during the *Thaw*.

In the second part of the article, the memoirs are analysed as textual constructions reflecting the various aspects of their authors' identity, including the issues of which community the authors of the memoirs see themselves as belonging to and whether and how the memories reflect social processes beyond the church; etc. The principal notions of this study are Maurice Halbwachs' conception of *individual and collective memory* (1992); Jan and Aleida Assmann's *cultural memory* (Jan Assmann 1995, 2008) and *forgetting* (Aleida Assmann 2008), and James V. Wertsch's *textual community and schematic*

*narrative templates* (2002, 2004). Relying primarily on Jan Assmann's definition of cultural memory as a particular form of collective memory, based on "texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assmann 1995: 132), the aim of this analysis is to show (a) which impulses have shaped the memories of church musicians; (b) whether the body of writings as a whole can be considered a homogeneous form of cultural memory; and (c) whether and how a set of memoirs written by a relatively marginal group of people could be interpreted among different discourses of memorizing the Soviet past.

Generally speaking, the memories of St. Olaf's Church musicians demonstrate a strong connection to the Estonian free church tradition, reflecting a complex set of elements, both musical and theological, that date back to the end of the 19th century, to the period of religious awakening and the appearance of the new free churches in Estonia. The most important musical texts mentioned in the memoirs are simple hymns from these times. But alongside the hymns, a lot of musicians pay particular attention to the large-scale classical musical works. Considering the human characteristics and values revealed in the writings, the most important qualities are a commitment to the Christian principles of helpfulness and humility. It follows that the individual memories of the church musicians demonstrate the dominant impact of the free church community and that the musicians identified themselves as members of a fairly homogeneous and stable religious group.