

**ACROSS THE BORDERS:  
UNFOLDING THE PERSONALITY OF CREATIVE  
INTELLECTUALS THROUGH THEIR CORRESPONDENCE –  
THE EPISTOLARY HERITAGE OF TUUDUR VETTIK**

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**Abstract.** This article analyses the correspondence (1959–1975) between two outstanding Estonian cultural figures – the conductors Roland Laasmäe and Tuudur Vettik, and the correspondence (1955–1967) of Tuudur Vettik with his wife Lonni Vettik-Paigaline. For a researcher, reading private correspondence reveals a confidential world, describing times and circumstances long past. Letters that were not meant for the public eye, tell the truth about life, describe the inner realm of the writer and open up a window to his personal experiences and innermost reflections. They allow the capturing of the writer's frame of mind, his concealed motifs and goals. Correspondence can fill in the blank areas in the knowledge and interpretation of history, can cast light on behind-the-scenes life and give valuable information about complicated historical times. The correspondence of these two intellectuals is a fascinating example of the school of correspondence. Vettik's letters, written to his wife from prison, are open-hearted and sincere; yet with a brutal vocabulary, they give a figurative description of life in a Gulag prison camp in Siberia.

**Keywords:** Correspondence of creative intellectuals, Estonian cultural history, multilayer creative heritage, mental and physical repression, Gulag prison camp in Siberia, Soviet military occupation.

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*The arrival of a letter or two is still an event,  
It is read twice or three times,  
Put in the pocket and looked at again.*

Richard Jefferies (1884:201)

## **1. Introduction**

Correspondence is a common literary genre. It denotes texts that bridge the seen and the unseen borders throughout history, be they geographical, ideological or social.

“Like all literary activities, it derives its meaning and significance from how it is situated within cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Despite its prevalence, however, little is known about the meanings and uses of letter reading and writing in diverse cultural contexts” (Kendrick Hissani 2007:195). In their research, Barton and Hall say, “the importance of letter-writing can be seen in that the phenomenon has been widespread historically, being one of the earliest forms of writing”, paying attention not just to the topic of letters but also to the role of the writer in this process. “Historically, distinct roles around letter-writing have developed, including the idea of someone who writes (and reads) letters for someone else” (Barton and Hall 2000:1–7).

There is no doubt that letters make an interesting, yet a complicated source material in psychological and socio-political meaning. Firstly, the reasons behind writing are always different, arising from the circumstances under which the letters were born. Letters can be addressed to authorities, the public, a sweetheart, a friend, an acquaintance etc. Letters can be petitions to the government, or scientific disputes between like minds, or discussions between writers, musicians or politicians. Letters can be sent from a battlefield (war letters) or from prison. The nature of letters can also be very deceiving and unreal. Hence letters must be analysed as a dialogue between two, several or many people, at the same time seeing and understanding the relations they reflect between a person, family and society.

Depending on context, namely on the familiarity or lack of knowledge of it, a letter can give contradictory signals to outsiders of the facts, words, pictures and thoughts. Cécile Dauphin has suggested that letters should be considered “an experimental form, a meeting place between the social and the inner being, between conventions and their use in practice, between the private and the political” (Dauphin 2002:44). Eve Annuk says, that “the conceptions, created by printed texts circulating in public, can drastically differ from the conceptions gathered from the unpublished written texts on a phenomenon, person or era” (Annuk 2003:838). When studying correspondence, it is therefore crucially important to rely on frame questions and – arising from the peculiarity of each individual correspondence – to observe more specific topics.

World literature knows many fascinating correspondences between creative intellectuals; letters kept in court archives, plus private and professional correspondence between presidents can be of great interest. However, the prevailing tendency is to publish discovered sources without delving into their context and background. “More often than not, the correspondence has been analysed from a rather narrow point of view”, Toon van Houdt and Jan Papy say (Van Houdt 2002).

However, the analysis, research and studying of letters as a primary source is methodologically dealt with at several history faculties (e.g. Walbert s.a. and Schrag s.a.), providing a systematic framework i.e. questionnaires for using primary sources. The institutions of higher education exploring epistolary heritage are located mainly in the USA and Great Britain. The theoretical aspects of letter-writing have been studied by Charles Bazerman, who focuses on the history of writing and demonstrates how letters have served as a source of various literary

genres; Konstantin Dierks discusses historical correspondence in 18th century America etc.

Analysing correspondence, the source must first be placed in its historical context, asking questions such as who was the author, who was the recipient, what was the historic background, are there many facts in the text to rely on, and is there any hidden meaning between the lines. Interpreting sources, one must consider the social and educational background of the author; we must analyse the author's use of words to judge whether an expression was grotesque, humorous, mocking or ambiguous. It is also important to know if the letter was addressed to a wider readership or if it was part of an intimate correspondence between two people.

Interpreting sources, one must not forget that historical texts are never one-to-one explanations of the world at the moment of writing. Observing a certain period or situation through a historical prism, one should remember that the view may be distorted, obscure and without explicit contours. Such perspective can create prejudice or cause misinterpretation of texts. Early historical sources often distort past facts and tend to be subjective. One must approach these sources with great tact. Black-and-white judgment cannot be passed on situations and relations described in letters; not everything can be taken for granted. However, a researcher must have certain amount of trust towards the author.

Liisi Eglit says, that "compared to other source materials, the speciality of letters lies in the first-hand recording of events" (forthcoming) and this allows studying social processes through intimate thoughts shared by people who have been in the middle of events.

Letters usually follow a set form: date, address, introduction, closing lines and signature. Letters are era-sensitive; certain conventions have dictated the contents of letters throughout history. "In this sense, the conventions might be likened to a script and each diary or letter to an actual performance", says Stowe (Annuk 2003:840).

Private correspondence is a unique and irreplaceable source of information, allowing researchers to study history at a grass-roots level (Dobson and Ziemann 2008:60). It may first seem that private correspondence goes mostly about routine family business, expressing friendship or love or giving instructions. But taking a deeper look at the subject matter may guide a researcher to fascinating new trails that unwind historical events from a fresh angle. Knowing and observing all the above circumstances, unique information can be collected from private correspondence.

Reading a personal letter, we break into a confidential and private world and attempt to crack the code of patterns from the past, whereas private letters may also contain intimate moments. As a source of history, private correspondence allows drawing an integral picture of the author's frame of mind, world outlook and cultural aspirations, helping to analyse the mentality, slang and customs of the person and the era. In addition to the role of letters in biographical research and in putting together the life stories of great figures, uncensored correspondence is a valuable source of learning about the daily life and mentality of an era. It is also helpful in casting light on relationships and concealed social undercurrents.

## 2. Publication of correspondence in Estonia

Talking about epistolary research done in Estonia, notes have been published on the correspondence of intellectuals who lived in Estonia at the turn of the century; some letters have also been published in their original form, but the epistolary heritage has not been commented on or analysed sufficiently.

One of the oldest known epistolary legacies is that of an Estonian poet Juhan Weitzenberg (1838–1877) – his 47 letters to parents and other intellectuals make up an important source of cultural heritage. It was due to the collective reading of Weitzenberg's letters that the peasants of Erastvere and Kanepi got to know about the Finnish Saima canal system and Finnish, German and Swiss wildlife and people before the first Song Festival. Literary critic Alma Selge collected Juhan Weitzenberg's letters from people to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth and published these for the first time at the magazine *Eesti Kirjandus* (Hirvlaane 2008:4).

The collection "Eduard Tubin's Letters" (Rumessen 2006), published and annotated by Vardo Rumessen, is quite voluminous. The letters are presented in chronological order, supplied with references and thorough comments; therefore it can be regarded as a serious work of research.

Sirje Olesk has studied the correspondence of Estonian intellectuals. After researching the epistolary heritage of Lydia Koidula, she stated with distress, that "even today, our people haven't read all of Koidula's letters. The biggest part of her epistolary heritage – letters home from Kroonlinn and from her big trip abroad to mother and father in Tartu, to sister Eugenie and brother-in-law Heinrich Rosenthal in Tallinn and brothers Harry and Eugen Jannsen to where they happened to be – is particularly poorly known" (Olesk 2003).

Eerik Teder has put together a monograph about Anton Hansen Tammsaare, consisting of the writer's correspondence and supplied with commentaries and afterword (Teder 1993, 1988). Mai Levin, who has studied the work of Eduard Wiiralt and analysed his creative heritage, says that "Wiiralt's heritage is vast – his epistolary heritage, for instance, definitely needs to be published" (Kaugema 1998).

The epistolary heritage of the Tuglas family is relatively well-preserved. The bulky correspondence of both Elo and Friedebert (Kulli 2006) has been published with comments. The same goes for the correspondence between Marie Under and Friedebert Tuglas (Hinrikus 2006), that started out of passion and lasted for decades. The diaries of Elo Tuglas have also been published. Yet, all those publications are for the reader to study and ponder on only, as little or no research has been done with the material and these publications lack a scientific approach.

Pianist and writer Kābi Laretei, who has lived and worked in exile in Sweden, published a selection of letters written to her by Ingmar Bergman in 1957–2001 (Laretei 2008). Regrettably these letters have not been analysed scientifically.

The *Elavik* series, published by the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum (since 2005) has issued several unique correspondences. Ants Eskola's letters to Hugo

Laur (Vaher 2005) and Laur's letters to Eskola (Vaher 2006), rich in background information on the cultural circles of these days have been made available to a wider public; the correspondence between Mart Saar and Tuudur Vettik (Tosso 2007), Villem Kapp's letters to his girlfriend Airen (Tosso 2008), Raimond Valgre's letters to his beloved Niina (Põldmäe 2010) etc. These books can be taken as culture-historical surveys and not as scientific publications, since the material lacks references and no profound textual studies have been performed.

Evaluating the situation with the research of Estonian epistolary heritage, one must agree that only the first steps are now being taken in this context.

Private correspondence has not been much used in studying the cultural history of Soviet Estonia. The reasons behind this are easy to understand and arise mainly from the political environment of those days, not so much from the informative value of that type of source. The reason for having so few private letters from the intellectuals of those days kept in the archives lies in the specific role the archives played in the Soviet system. On the one hand, there was no need to record the life and work of *ordinary* intellectuals. The archives were focused on collecting memorabilia, primarily the private documents of people who were involved in the revolutionary movement. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine Estonian intellectuals eagerly archiving their correspondence. After WWII, Estonian archives were subordinated to the notorious governmental system behind mass deportations – the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The survivors of Stalinist mass repressions know that it was very dangerous to express your thoughts in private letters, as there was no such thing as the confidentiality of correspondence. Just the opposite – it was common practice that letters were opened and read by the monitoring authorities and sometimes letters never reached the addressee. This way compromising information was collected.

Researching and publishing correspondence may pose an ethical dilemma before the biographer – particularly in the context of the Soviet era, where complicated ethical issues, related to the position and relationship of the researcher with his subject matter were commonplace (Annuk 2006:163). The problem can be expanded even further: bringing private correspondences to scientific use allows compacting the historical informative environment. Correspondence contains background information not being of particular interest to one researcher, but very much so for another. The role of a scientist in the interpretation of correspondence is crucial, for it is the scientist who raises a question, has an angle of approach and gives a final opinion. Again we are back at the topic of ethics and tact at the interpretation and publication of such source material. Profound work with correspondence as an exceptional source of Estonian history is waiting to be done – a number of theoretical aspects as well as working out and applying of the methods of analysing text and genre are awaiting a scientific approach (Annuk 2006:163).

Urve Lippus, one of Estonia's most distinguished music critics, appreciates personal notes as an important source next to archival documents. As Soviet journalism was highly censored, "memories, subjective by nature, become equal

historical sources to official documents, supposedly more objective”, Lippus says (2011:9). Therefore private conversations, reminiscences and the more so the correspondence between two trusting people come as a valuable historical source. However, letters and correspondence, when taken separately, don’t measure up to historiographical sources or can serve as such only in juxtaposition with other sources.

Memoirs and books have been written on the Soviet annexation of Estonia; the period has served as a subject for numerous researches. In this context I would like to draw special attention to the studies by Toomas Karjahärm (Karjahärm and Luts 2005, Laas 2010). He has written a lot about the suppression of artists and scientists in the period. Lippus gives a comprehensive overview of the fate of musicians-interpreters in her article “Eesti muusika kaotused Nõukogude okupatsioonil läbi” / “Losses of Estonian Music Due to the Soviet Occupation” (Lippus 2008:175–213). Regrettably even less is written on the experiences and careers of the Estonian choir conductors back in those days. The same applies to private correspondence between intellectuals. Unlike the 19th century and the early 20th century, the end of the 20th century is remarkably scant of publications of the private correspondence of intellectuals. For obvious reasons, the area has been most dealt with by the researchers of the Estonian Literary Museum (Rutt Hinrikus), the Estonian National Museum and other culture research institutions.

Introducing private correspondence of distinguished intellectuals as an important source of research enables to better know and understand the topics and persons mentioned in the correspondence and thereby better understand their motifs and the socio-political processes in general and, as a result, draw conclusions. Studying present sources has provided an opportunity to draw conclusions on issues related to the writers’ private and professional lives, and also to cast light on the social scene prevalent in Estonia in the totalitarian period; it was as much an intellectual prison as it was a physical one. These letters contain important notes regarding the colleagues and friends of both choir conductors, the authorities of those days, the opportunities available and unavailable to intellectuals to realise themselves in the era of suppression.

### 3. The epistolary heritage of Tuudur Vettik

This article analyses correspondence between two outstanding cultural figures – the conductors Roland Laasmäe and Tuudur Vettik (1959–1975)<sup>1</sup> and correspondence (1955–1967) between Tuudur Vettik and his wife Lonni Vettik-Paigaline<sup>2</sup>. Their full correspondence has been published in annexes to the author’s dissertation “The Role of a Creative Intellectual in Socio-Political Processes by the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Laasmäe’s and Tuudur Vettik’s correspondence in 1959–1975: “Tuudur Vettik’s letters to Laasmäe”. Author’s private records; “Roland Laasmäe’s letters to Vettik”. ETMM, M 347:1/114.

<sup>2</sup> Lonni Vettik-Paigaline (1907–1968), Tuudur Vettik’s wife.

Analysis of the Song Celebration Movement and the Creative Activities of Tuudur Vettik and Roland Laasmäe from 1940–1980” (Randjärv forthcoming).

The author obtained Tuudur Vettik’s letters from Roland Laasmäe’s widow Liina Laasmäe. Their correspondence includes 52 letters; the number of letters exchanged between Lonni and Tuudur Vettik is 15<sup>3</sup>. The era has been profoundly researched following the chronology of political events, but the persons related to the choral movement and their activities have so far been less analysed. The author implies that the conceptual approach of this research will help to fill the void. The correspondence between Roland Laasmäe and Tuudur Vettik is a source material introduced by the author for the first time for the purposes of research.

Yet the correspondence between Tuudur Vettik and Roland Laasmäe does not give a full overview of past events. Some contextual gaps may have been discussed by the parties when they met physically or by phone. The author has attempted to compensate the gaps with additional information gathered during her meetings and interviews with a number of Vettik’s and Laasmäe’s contemporaries. The letters are methodologically analysed, being based on the topics discussed.

The nature of the correspondence between Tuudur Vettik and Roland Laasmäe was highly personal. The letters were most definitely not written with possible future public discussion in mind.

The correspondence between the two colleagues and the internal family correspondence between Lonni and Tuudur are studied separately. Vettik’s letters from a Siberian forced- labour camp to his wife Lonni open up a completely new, an extremely intimate and a previously unfamiliar face of Vettik, just like the letters written by him after returning home.

The letters sent from imprisonment are characterized by brutal slang and indecent language, evidence of the robust impact of the environment on Vettik’s personality. This phenomenon was also described by Anne Applebaum in her work on the history of the Gulag forced-labour camps (2003:xvi). From Vettik’s letters to his wife it appears that in addition to the permitted two letters per year, prisoners tried to, and sometimes succeeded, in sending letters home with the help of discharged fellow prisoners. Such letters remained uncensored.

The same applies to the correspondence between Laasmäe and Vettik; the speciality lies in its unusually open and sincere tone. Carefully reading the letters and between the lines, we see that in addition to exchanging information, the correspondents also exchanged tuning forks i.e. the methodology for working with choirs – if we observe their correspondence from the scientific perspective of this paper with the choral and song celebration movement as the subject matter. Advice is given on the interpretation of choral compositions and putting together concert programmes. The letters also contain advice on how to lead one’s life without getting involved in the madness of the regime and not getting intimidated

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<sup>3</sup> Tuudur Vettik’s correspondence with his wife Lonni in 1955–1967: “Lonni Vettik-Paigaline’s letters to Tuudur Vettik”. ETMM, M 347:1/107; “Tuudur Vettik’s letters to Lonni Vettik-Paigaline”. ETMM, M 347:1/108.

by it. Naturally the correspondence between the two musicians, choir conductors, a teacher and a student, two colleagues and good friends is published in the original orthography. (Randjärv forthcoming).

The letters contain outspoken episodes of their personal lives, critical opinions on different people and the political situation, thereby truly describing the correspondents' inner world. This allows capturing their mind, inmost motifs and goals. What a researchers may find most interesting in Tuudur Vettik's letters to different people, are his reviews of the then ideological-political, cultural and social atmosphere in Estonia. Tuudur Vettik's correspondence with Roland Laasmäe allows taking a closer look at the mutual relations between the two figures of the song celebration movement.

The letters of Vettik and Laasmäe date back to the times when the official ideology and the aspirations of the intellectuals differed substantially. Their communication gives a base for understanding better this less-known and hidden world – the true aspiration of intellectuals. Directly in places, sometimes in a more concealed manner – in remarks or between the lines – the communication between Laasmäe and Vettik reveals the people who with excessive eagerness licked the boots of the occupants and sometimes even anticipated their orders (Randjärv forthcoming). The author finds it worth mentioning that the correspondence between Roland Laasmäe and Tuudur Vettik in a way repeats – twenty years later – the style of the correspondence (1930–1940) between friends and colleagues Mart Saar and Vettik (Tosso 2007), which evolved from the didactic to the personal, even to the intimate.

The Laasmäe-Vettik correspondence inspired the author to conduct a number of interviews (Randjärv forthcoming). The Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre professors emeriti Kuno Areng and Ants Üleoja and the former choir-conducting lecturer of Tartu Music College Valve Lepik all remember Tuudur Vettik as a colourful, sharp-tongued colleague and reveal the background of the organisation of song celebrations and the related intrigues. They speak highly of Vettik as a talented choir conductor and as a wonderful teacher; however they regarded his personality as being extremely contradictory. The analysis of his letters fully confirms this impression of his contemporaries.

We get a broad view of the personality and private life of Roland Laasmäe from this correspondence, but also a glimpse of his daily reality and the vital problems related to living in poverty, plus his family and health problems.

Vettik's letters to his wife contain valuable information on his personal emotions and backstage life. The Estonian Theatre and Music Museum archives contain only two of Lonni's letters back to Tuudur from the period 1955–1967. However, even these give some idea of their family affairs and the topics deeply interesting or irritating the people in those days.

These two different correspondences constitute interesting and true information about being *involved* in Estonian music life in a very complicated period. The facts about their lives allow us to conclude, that despite the repression of Soviet power,



Vettik and Laasmäe were true pioneers, who nurtured the Estonians' sense of national kinship.

Their correspondence is an authentic and inexhaustible historical resource for analysing the role of a creative intellectual in critical socio-political processes.

Chronologically, the correspondence between Tuudur and Lonni Vettik is earlier and covers mostly Vettik's years in the Taichet forced-labour camp in Siberia. These letters from afar serve as a prologue to the later correspondence between Vettik and Laasmäe, the mood and tone of which is affected by the experiences Vettik had had during his imprisonment. For this reason the author begins with analysing the open and sincere correspondence between spouses.

### *3.1. Letters home to a sweetheart*

Exceptionally sincere, stunningly emotional, sometimes swaggering, brutal, even indecent, yet full of tenderness and love are Tuudur Vettik's letters, sent home to his wife Lonni from imprisonment. Lonni's letters to Tuudur are equally caring and full of longing.

Only two letters have been preserved of the many sent to Tuudur by Lonni Vettik in the 1950s<sup>4</sup>. One is a reply sent to the prison camp and the other dates back to 1957, when Vettik attended a choir camp in the county of Pärnumaa. Lonni's letters are warm and homey, yet matter-of-fact. Tuudur's on-going requests to Lonni to write back are understandable, as convicts' correspondence was very limited. This is why Lonni Vettik rejoices at a letter that arrived at her birthday and describes the preparations undertaken to welcome Tuudur back home: "I finally had a cheerful surprise last night. Came home from work, tired, joyless and worn out and what did I see ... a letter on the table! Many thanks for the beautiful song, I see that you're still thinking of Lontu. [...] I wrote you back to you immediately and telegraphed the money - 100 roubles - on March 31. You should have received it by now. Salme.<sup>5</sup> sent you a parcel a few days ago so that you could receive it by May 1. Darling! I have done all that you asked me. Today I'm having an appointment with a lawyer and I'm determined to send yet one more application. I'm going to attach translations of newspaper articles and reviews of your work and activities. For some reason I have high hopes, as we will be putting the appeal together after the 20th Party Congress. I wish and I hope. It's a pity you're so far away. If closer, you would have been at home by now, I'm sure."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to running errands, tender hands and a loving heart was waiting for Tuudur at home: "All your manuscripts and works are well kept, both the old and the new ones. Nothing is lost. They're all in one desk drawer. Yours suits are tidy as well, one new - dark, one new - grey and one older - light grey. Plus a pair of grey trousers. Mamma has mended all socks and taken care of the underwear. She did a great job patching your grey silk pyjama pants. Your long brown home robe

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<sup>4</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/108, 20–21.

<sup>5</sup> Salme Vettik-Kangermann, Tuudur Vettik's sister.

<sup>6</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/108, 20–21.

and the grey chequered robe are also clean and waiting. And a pair of slippers. And a new pair of leather sole shoes! Dearest! I'll conclude the letter now! Write me more postcards as I can definitely receive those. Mamma and Täpi are sending their love! Hugging, Lontu".<sup>7</sup>

The scanty lines exchanged between Tuudur and Lonni tell about deep trust between the two. Lonni's presence definitely gave Tuudur the courage to survive the six inhuman prison years filled with humiliation and injustice. The contents and tone of the letters well depict the spirit of the era, when the Bolshevik party and government decided over people and all aspects of their lives.

Vettik's letters to Lonni, kept in the archive of Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, are bound together and make up a book.<sup>8</sup> They include Vettik's letters home, written on various dates. Reading them as a monologue without replies, it resembles a diary, as it was never possible to send them as separate letters anyway. Hence getting replies to specific questions was improbable.

Each letter contains longing for news from home. He was obviously able to send some letters out of prison with the released prisoners or prison employees, as can be read in his letter from July 4, 1955<sup>9</sup>: "I know my letters home are being withheld somewhere – I just cannot believe you write so seldom. This is why I advise you to post them not in Tallinn, but elsewhere. Try the Leningrad train post wagon. [...] This way I just might receive my letters".

Tuudur Vettik's letters give a detailed overview of the life and conditions at the prison camp i.e. the survival opportunities: "This is how it goes here: if someone has done the time, deportation is a sure thing. Much cursing and swearing. The Krasnoyarsk Krai is like another punishment for people. This is how things work out in paradise. You have your sentence read out, you get 10 or 25 years and that's that. Not a single word about deportation. And yet everyone is deported to Krasnoyarsk Krai without legal grounds. Our camp releases home only invalids unable to get dressed or go to the canteen. [...] I live in the best block. For over half a year I've been able to eat hospital food. It's extremely poor, but still slightly better than the regular food. I'm always hungry! There's almost no work here at the moment. The orchestra was dismissed. Some people got released, others were sent elsewhere as a disciplinary punishment. So we've not had concerts here since May 1."

The last paragraph proves that Vettik did not quit music even in prison – he wrote about 20 compositions every year and played – as long as it was possible – in an orchestra put together by the prisoners.

On August 25, 1955, Vettik writes to Lonni about his health and the falling-out of his teeth: "29.VII I lost the last teeth I got from Peltchikov. So now I'm toothless. I've got now false teeth above and nothing below. But that's ok. There's no dentist here or else I would let the doctor replace the lower ones."

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<sup>7</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/108, 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> ETMM, M 347:1/107.

<sup>9</sup> ETMM 347:1/107.

Vettik is being quite ironic and self-ironic between the lines. Can we presume this is one of the traits that allowed him to survive the hardships? In Estonia, Vettik's same trait annoyed many of his colleagues who had an inflated self-esteem.

The obscenity of some of the lines he sent to Lonni is stunning. It feels incomprehensible how Vettik dared to send his beloved pretty wife prison expressions in black and white.

Despite his offensive language, Vettik makes efforts to keep his brainwork agile and asks his wife to send him something to read. Pay attention to his remark: "Those books must of course be printed in the Soviet period". This sentence contains judgment and attitude, but also an attempt to fit in.

In July 1955 [date missing] he wrote: "But life here has made everyone dull and numb, so that there's nobody to talk to. There is nobody from the Estonian intelligentsia here to discuss a problem with or just to argue over something. So I take an article from *The Sirp ja Vasar* newspaper and hold a mental dispute, just to give at least some exercise to the brain. But if I'm going to stay here longer, I'd like you to send me a German language textbook, or some easier novel or tale published for schools and having a glossary. It could help sharpen my brain. You should know my skill level. I even read Tammsaare's "Vargamäe" in German. But it would be nice if you added a dictionary, too. Those books must of course be printed in the Soviet period. To fight the numbness of my brain I've been trying to compose music, or else time would catch up with me and pass me by."

The recurring topic through all the correspondence is the anticipation of his release. In 1955–1956, when these letters were written, freedom was indeed in the air. Vettik's 25+5 sentence had been reduced – first by 10 years, then more – until 8 years remained. After the thaw that followed the death of Stalin, all political prisoners had their files reopened. "First of all I desire to get free", Vettik wrote in July 1955. There was still half a year to go to be free again.

#### **4. The singularity of Roland Laasmäe's and Tuudur Vettik's correspondence in the discipline of history**

There is so little private correspondence published, because there was so little private correspondence. It was dangerous to open yourself up in letters, as the letters were read by a vigilant eye. There was a popular saying: *Watch out! Big Brother is listening...* Another obviously more important reason is the fact that private letters never reached the archives. It would have been outright stupid to give your private correspondence to an archive or a museum that back in those days were all subordinated to the repressive system. However, private correspondence serves as an invaluable source of historic information, as it allows putting together an integrated picture of the intellectual, the cultural and ideological principles of the writer and it illustrates the mentality of the era.

Commonly, sending letters is associated with the description of personal emotions to a pen friend, hence possessing low generalization value in terms of

history. However, the author's view is that this cannot be said regarding the correspondence between Laasmäe and Vettik – the two great figures of the Estonian choral movement. Careful reading and studying of these letters has, piece by piece, added to the general knowledge of the era and the prevalent processes, thereby providing valuable historic information.

The term *time of thaw* is often used to refer to the period of liberalization that followed the end of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union. Its impact on society has been analysed in great detail. A nutshell description from Olaf Kuuli: “Soviet leaders realised the lack of vitality in the existing system and that it had to be reformed” (Kuuli 2002:155).

The general trends in society are always easier to analyse than what is happening inside people. The Laasmäe-Vettik correspondence does not discuss only choral music and interpretational issues. Either directly or by implication, it reveals the complicated socio-psychological aspects of the era, describing the behaviour of their colleagues. In his letters Vettik asks Laasmäe why Ritsing is spreading gossip<sup>10</sup>. Closer analysis of Ritsing's behaviour would require separate research. Laasmäe mentions to Vettik<sup>11</sup> that Variste criticized Vettik's “Rõõmu-päev” at the song celebration general committee, because the song, in his opinion, was unsuitable for being performed at a song celebration. Variste's person, his activities and underlying motifs make a subject for further research. Behind the quote from Vettik's letter saying that “the Tallinn people should have been told that Tartu men did not consider [...] the song weak”,<sup>12</sup> stand tens of people, each with their own career and the methods of making it. While the author has touched on these topics in her dissertation, the detailed analysis of the actions of one or another person, and drawing conclusions from that, did not belong to the scope of this research.

An important part of getting prepared to study this correspondence was looking for archival sources. The author set a task to analyse the extent, and if at all, the *Orwellian* era allowed a person to keep his singularity, and to what extent was a choir leader able to retain and nurture the idea of sovereignty among his singers, with the repertoire and joint activities, and by doing so bend cultural and social processes to one or another direction. It is important to underline that Laasmäe-Vettik exchanged their letters in a period, when the prevailing ideology was: art must be *socialist in content and national in form*. Although this Soviet slogan was repeated constantly, Roland Laasmäe succeeded in following his own path even in the darkest of times in Estonian history, and minding his own business. Uno Uiga remembers: “Roland Laasmäe's moving to Tartu and the establishment and rapid development of the Graduates' Male Choir (Gaudeamus) brought fresh air to local

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<sup>10</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the final preparations for his Tartu concert and a survey of his imprisonment. 4. 02.1968.

<sup>11</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about restrictions imposed on the scope of the jubilee song celebration, the repertoire and the related intrigues. 6.08.1968.

<sup>12</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe. Expression of criticism about the poor protection of his composition “Rõõmu-päev”. 28.08.1968.

cultural circles in terms of a richer concert life, but also perked up communication between colleagues. Roland Laasmäe was soon highly appreciated for his principles and honesty.”<sup>13</sup>

The first letter at the author’s disposal<sup>14</sup> was sent to Laasmäe by Vettik on October 10, 1959. The correspondents had however had some earlier contact and a cooperation experience as teacher and student – Roland Laasmäe was Tuudur Vettik’s student at The Tallinn State Conservatoire. The mixed tone of their correspondence – sometimes matter-of-fact and sometimes downright familiar – reveals that those two music figures were like minds with a previous experience of mutual comprehension. Therefore it is most important to carry out an in-depth analysis of the first letter from 1959 in particular, as it displays the first elements of the nature, singularity, style and personality of the years and years of correspondence between Laasmäe and Vettik which were still to come.

The first letter is symbolic and informative, like a prologue for the following 16 years of written communication. In his first letter to Vettik, Laasmäe gives an overview of Tartu choirs and their conductors. This is an interesting document, as it gives a survey of choral singing in Tartu in 1959 and of the 16 choirs that worked there at that time. We get a glimpse of the devotion with which Vettik, who had returned from Siberian prison camp a few years before, and his student Laasmäe were making preparations for a concert.

They had very clear intentions – all choir conductors were sent personal invitations to the concert in the assembly hall of Tartu University.<sup>15</sup> In addition to choral conductors, it was decided to send honorary invitations to other big players in the university town. Among them were: The Rector of the University Fyodor Klement with his wife and the Rector of the Estonian Academy of Agriculture Minna Klement (she didn’t have a husband and was invited alone). Here we see that both universities in Tartu – Tartu State University and The Estonian Academy of Agriculture – had rectors with the same surname in 1959 without the two being related to one another.

Amongst cultural figures, Juhan Simm<sup>16</sup>, artist Kalju Polli<sup>17</sup> with his wife and the Head of the Department of Culture of the Executive Committee of Tartu Town Council Elvi Alekand<sup>18</sup> with her husband were all invited to the concert. She was the only representative of the town administration to receive an invitation. “I think

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<sup>13</sup> Recollections of Uno Uiga to the author in May 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the forthcoming concert tour of the Eesti Energia male choir to Tartu and Tartu choirs. 10.10.1959.

<sup>15</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik, 10.10.1959.

<sup>16</sup> Juhan Simm (1885–1959), conductor and composer.

<sup>17</sup> Kalju Polli (1928–2004), painter.

<sup>18</sup> Elvi Alekand (b. 1932), cultural figure, head of the Department of Culture of the Executive Committee of Tartu Town Council in 1959–1977.

it is pointless to send invitations to civic authorities, since they seldom go out to pubs or concerts”, Laasmäe said, who knew about life in his town.<sup>19</sup>

For the concert to succeed and to become a cultural landmark, choir conductors had to keep in mind a number of things. First, it had to be held at a time that would not overlap with another cultural event. Second, the most important venue – the assembly hall of Tartu University – had to be vacant. Third, a contract had to be concluded with the superintendent of the university main building. Next, posters had to be printed, a story introducing the concert had to be published in the local newspaper *Edasi* and the sale of tickets had to be supervised. Additionally, the seating plan and time of appearance of the choir were discussed – all had to be under control, nothing was left unplanned.<sup>20</sup> November 21 was going to be the date of the concert and they decided to bring 120 men to Tartu. Vettik thought that the assembly hall couldn't accommodate more. Kalmer Tennosaar was invited to make an appearance as a soloist.<sup>21</sup>

The correspondence between Roland Laasmäe and Tuudur Vettik falls into four major topics: 1) choral singing and the song celebration movement, 2) Tuudur Vettik's advice on interpretation and the analysis of compositions, 3) Tuudur Vettik about the repression of cultural figures and about his own fate, 4) Laasmäe's and Vettik's confidential discussions on personal topics.

#### *4.1. Reflection of choral singing and the song celebration movement in correspondence*

In order to better understand the importance of the spirit of a choir to its members and conductors, the mere reading of newspapers, reports and regular archive data is not enough. Private letters and personal memories address the issue far more directly. The time with their own pressures, miseries and joys is present in their long-term and exceptionally sincere correspondence. Worries related to the time, life pressure and the heartache caused by injustice are directly or indirectly present in all letters. Both men describe problems that may seem odd to present-day readers. However, choirs and their conductors had to deal with such matters on a daily basis back in those days. Like, for instance, with how the party checked concert programmes to the tiniest of detail and prescribed compulsory presentations of the so-called Lenin songs etc. The rigidity of the system is revealed in the Composers' Union archive data: how the repertoire was approved and banned, how the ordering of new compositions from composers and writers following orders given by Moscow was taking place.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Laasmäe's letter to Vettik about sending invitations to the concert organised in Tartu. 1.11.1959.

<sup>20</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the forthcoming guest concert of the Eesti Energia male choir in Tartu and about Tartu choirs. 10.10.1959.

<sup>21</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the forthcoming guest concert of the Eesti Energia male choir in Tartu. 25.10.1959.

<sup>22</sup> Correspondence between the Estonian Soviet Composers' Union and the ESSR Writers' Union. ERA.R-1958-1-13 (1947); ERA.R-1958-1-17 (1948); ERA.R-1205-2-383 (1948); ERA.R-1958-1-35 (1949); ERA.R-1958-1-36 (1949); ERA.R-1958-1-70 (1953).

This has brought us to the next problem faced by the two colleagues – lack of an original repertoire. Their correspondence had already lasted for a few years, when Laasmäe complained to Vettik about being desperate to find choir compositions and so he approached Vettik on that matter. *I think you've got something left in your closet*. “I am particularly interested in the repertoire for male choirs”, Laasmäe wrote to Vettik in 1964.<sup>23</sup> That was not his last request in the matter. Vettik looked for ways to help out Laasmäe and his male choir.

They had another problem with the printing of notes, programmes, invitations and posters. This topic is recurrent in their correspondence and is discussed in connection with organising concerts and getting the necessary number of copies of the notes. In Soviet times publications could be printed only with written approval from the authorities and the process was generally problematic. It was peculiar to the era that first of all, orders had to be included in the working plan of the printing-house.<sup>24</sup> For instance in 1967, the jubilee year of the Great October Socialist Revolution, the printing-houses were overloaded because letters of honour had to be printed.<sup>25</sup>

On several occasions complaints were raised in their correspondence that the quality of printing was beyond any criticism. Laasmäe wrote to Vettik on February 2, 1968: “We prepared new invitations. They were no better! You've got to take your own paper to the printing-house – it is like using a public toilet!”<sup>26</sup>

It is true that sometimes orders were placed too late by them. In any case, all changes had to be agreed first with the culture department of the executive committee and the party to be able to get things printed anew.<sup>27</sup>

The insufficient spread of information was another thing peculiar to the Soviet period. Many scheduled events were kept secret until the last moment and this was a great obstacle to a choir conductor who had to pre-plan work with his singers. Receiving treatment in Narva-Jõesuu in January 1972, Laasmäe spotted a short notice in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*<sup>28</sup> about an international choir festival. The festival – Tallinn-72 – was going to take place in Tallinn. This made Laasmäe forget about his frail health. He asked his friend Vettik, who was in charge of the event, why had such a big event been hushed up. Laasmäe was obviously very upset, as he promised in his letter to *set* the Choir Council *on fire*<sup>29</sup>.

Information in the middle of page 15 of the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar*: “Pursuant to the resolution of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, a choir festival Tallinn-72 will be held in Tallinn on June 24–28, 1972. In this music celebration, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Soviet Union, choirs from all Soviet

<sup>23</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the choirs working in Tartu. 16.05.1964.

<sup>24</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the preparations for his Tartu concert. 9.09.1967.

<sup>25</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik. 9.09.1967.

<sup>26</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the final preparations for his concert. 2.02.1968.

<sup>27</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about problems with printing notes and organising a joint concert with the Riga choir in Tallinn. 26.02.1968.

<sup>28</sup> Advertisement for the International Choir Festival „Tallinn-72“ (1972) *Sirp ja Vasar* 2, 15, 14.01.

<sup>29</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about his treatment in Narva-Jõesuu. 28.01.1972.

republics and European socialist countries will participate. The choir sections' council of the General Committee of the Song Celebration of the ESSR hereby asks all choirs willing to participate to submit a pertinent application and the list of their repertoire to the Song Department of the ESSR House of National Creation by February 1, 1972 at the latest." Laasmäe, who stayed in Narva-Jõesuu at that time, was right: the festival was announced in one brief message and the choirs were left only two (!) weeks to decide about their participation.

As an aside, let it be hereby noted that the Tartu Male Choir *Gaudeamus* won first place among the male choirs and the festival Grand Prix at the first international choir festival Tallinn-72. The Grand Prix was a golden harp made by the Tallinn Piano Manufacturing Company.<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of the obstructions and a strict order to have songs from other socialist republics included in the programme, the choirs conducted by Laasmäe and Vettik always also performed their own Estonian songs, and the concerts of Laasmäe's *Gaudeamus* awoke and kept awake the Estonian spirit of their audience.<sup>31</sup> This conclusion can be made on the basis of the concert programmes as well as by analysing their correspondence. For Laasmäe and Vettik, concerts, tours and song days were like a holiday in the life of the nation. Both were interested in the establishment of a cultural network. Evidence of that are the concert tours of the male choir *Gaudeamus* to the Lake Baikal in Siberia, where Estonian choral music and singers received an exceptionally warm welcome. On July 6, 1971 Laasmäe wrote: "The Siberia tour is now over and I appeared as general conductor at the first local song celebration. Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Baikal are nice places. Students and scientists are prevailing. They have a much warmer attitude towards choir music than we do and we received a warm welcome. The tour was excellently arranged, both in terms of organisation and concerts. In any case, the expenses every man had to bear were definitely worthwhile bearing."<sup>32</sup>

Among other things it became evident from the correspondence published in this dissertation that the conductor of the Tomsk state and students' choirs Sotnikov wanted to include Vettik's "Nocturne" in their repertoire.<sup>33</sup>

We learn from the letters that Vettik was a regular follower of *Gaudeamus*' concerts. He always tried to be present and when he sometimes could not do so, he regretted it. For instance, he was unable to attend the *Gaudeamus*' guest performance in Tallinn, as he had to travel to Vilnius at the same time.<sup>34</sup> What a

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<sup>30</sup> The Grand Prix – Golden Harp – was donated to the Song Celebration Museum in Tartu by the male choir *Gaudeamus*.

<sup>31</sup> Illustrated annexes and lists of photos in the server of the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum. ftp.vettik.tmm; ftp.laasmae.tmm

<sup>32</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about his concert tour to Siberia, his failing health and his release from hospital. 6.07.1971.

<sup>33</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about a wish of the Tomsk choir to include his "Nocturne" in their programme. 28.08.1968.

<sup>34</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the interpretation of Hegar's "Witching Hour in Tydal" and the performances of *Gaudeamus*. 23.02.1974.



paradox! Nationally-minded Vettik, not even rehabilitated yet,<sup>35</sup> regretting his non-attendance at an event that was dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution ...

Their correspondence also reflects intrigues related to putting together the repertoire of the song celebrations. As a result of persistent lobbying done by culture-conscious choir conductors, the 1969 jubilee song celebration was held both in Tartu<sup>36</sup> and Tallinn. Laasmäe wrote to Vettik that the idea of beginning the jubilee song celebration in Tartu was discussed in Tallinn. We learn from his letter, that the head of the general committee of the jubilee song celebration Arnold Green<sup>37</sup> said that Tartu could have the song celebration only if the event won't outshine the great jubilee celebrated in Tallinn. The event was declared a nationwide undertaking and was administered by specialists in Tallinn. "We really don't have a say here. Besides, our standpoints differ in several matters with the men from Tallinn", Laasmäe says. It becomes evident from the letter that Tallinn did not accept repertoire suggestions from the Tartu conductors. "Your "Rõõmupäev"<sup>38</sup> was removed from the programme", he writes, adding, "that all general conductors will also be appointed in Tallinn. So, things look crappy. If the process continues to be managed like that, no good will come out of it! Dragged my spirit down. I have no desire whatsoever to continue."<sup>39</sup>

Vettik is now furious. He sends a letter to Tartu, already quoted above: "I'd like you to tell me precisely why they eliminated "Rõõmupäev" from the programme and who voted against it. I think you were in Tallinn, so you should know. In my opinion Tartu men were not vigorous enough in defending their right to organise the song celebration themselves."<sup>40</sup>

Tallinn considered it necessary to limit the number of people taking part in the Tartu song celebration. Analysing the 1969 jubilee song celebration programme in Tartu<sup>41</sup>, we indeed see that the Tallinn committee succeeded in cutting the programme to the minimum. Only boys, male choirs and brass bands were performing. There were no children, women or mixed choirs. There was also no traditional joint choir performance at the beginning and at the end of the celebration. "Seems like the repertoire was put together by a coterie and all was agreed beforehand",

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<sup>35</sup> Decree of the Supreme Court of the ERRS on the rehabilitation of Tuudur Vettik (15.01.1968) ERAF, 130-1-25630 [Cassation file no. 965.], 78–81.

<sup>36</sup> The Jubilee song festival in Tartu in 1969 was organised to celebrate the first song celebration that took place in Tartu in 1869.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Green (1920–2011), chairman of the general organising committee of the 1969 jubilee song festival. Former ERRS statesman and leader of the Soviet Olympic movement.

<sup>38</sup> Vettik's cantata "Rõkatame rõõmulaulu" (1960).

<sup>39</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about preparations for the jubilee song celebration, about the choir's plans in Tartu and about the building of a shared sauna-summer cottage Sanum. 25.06.1968.

<sup>40</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about preparations for the jubilee song celebration and the repertoire problems. 24.07.1968.

<sup>41</sup> Ojaveski, Toivo; Puust, Mart; Põldmäe, Alo (2002:105).

Laasmäe says, adding: “We were advised to add a revolutionary song<sup>42</sup> “Mööda mäгитеid””<sup>43</sup>.

We can only imagine the battles that took place behind the scene, when there was an attempt to replace a popular Estonian song, Vettik’s “Rõõmupäev” by a non-Estonian revolutionary song. However, when we compare the programmes of the 1969 Tartu and Tallinn song celebration programmes, we see that Laasmäe and other choir conductors from Tartu succeeded in putting together an Estonian-oriented programme.<sup>44</sup>

Introducing the life and work of Estonian choir conductors and composers from the past was part of Laasmäe’s and Vettik’s daily work. Back in Soviet times most of them were not introduced in books or in the press. The following topic in Vettik’s and Laasmäe’s correspondence is therefore very typical: Laasmäe is telling Vettik about the forthcoming celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Konstantin Tüρνpu’s birth. He wants Vettik to come and share his memories with the male choir Gaudeamus and introduce Tüρνpu’s life and compositions.<sup>45</sup> At that time neither of them believed in the probability of Tüρνpu’s name being introduced in a newspaper. However, it happened in Kodumaa<sup>46</sup> – a newspaper that was called into being to allure the Estonians in exile. Vettik accepted the invitation and said that the choir might send him an invitation mentioning their intention to hold a concert-lecture in Tartu to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tüρνpu’s birth and they could ask Vettik to take the floor. Maybe, he thought, they’ll let him then.<sup>47</sup>

Generations of singers grew up in the creative presence of the idealistic minds of Laasmäe and Vettik. Both were sensible intellectuals, who planned the future and managed the choral movement as a process, attempting to put together the best concert and song celebration programmes possible. With their activities and communication, they influenced the micro-worlds, attitudes and lifestyle of all choir members and their families.

The correspondence between Laasmäe and Vettik is not about trivialities. It gives multifaceted opinions on music and life in general, telling of one particular era in Estonian history in words, text and symbols. The new regime that invaded the country in 1940 and settled down in 1944 began to establish itself with a quick liquidation of clubs, societies, associations and creative groups to avoid the

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<sup>42</sup> I. Aturov’s song “Mööda mäгитеid ja orge”. (Find also by ref.: A. Turov.)

<sup>43</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the restrictions of the volume of the jubilee song celebration, repertoire policy and the related intrigues. 6.08.1968.

<sup>44</sup> Ojaveski, 130 aastat eesti laulupidusid / 130 Years of Estonian Song Celebrations, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about criticism published in the newspaper Edasi. 18.10.1965.

<sup>46</sup> The newspaper Kodumaa was the mouthpiece of the Union for Promoting Cultural Contacts with Estonians in Exile (VEKSA). The purpose of VEKSA (founded in 15.04.1960) was to influence the Estonians in exile and spread Soviet propaganda. Gustav Ernesaks was one of the founders of VEKSA.

<sup>47</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the methodology of teaching his choral compositions to choirs, about his new first name and about the alternatives to travel to Kastre. 1965.

concentration of the mental power of like minds. Any uncontrollable creative activity posed a danger to the ruling clique. However, the mass formation of choirs and the spreading of joint singing seemed a suitable tool for the Communist Party to channel masses of people to the *right* path. But in reality the choral movement was one of the most important mental resistance movements during the Soviet annexation. Back in those days, choirs – irrespective of the communist dictatorship – were the seeds of a civic society. Freedom of spirit was prevalent in choirs and people were not afraid of talking about things as they were.

Vettik and Laasmäe were creative intellectuals who, in addition to their music, also built a civic society that contrasted with the totalitarian regime. Hence they played a crucial role in critical socio-political processes – perhaps totally unaware of it, they actually maintained the civic society in Estonia.

#### 4.2. Tuudur Vettik on the interpretation and analysis of compositions

The paragraphs where Vettik is discussing the nuances of learning a repertoire constitute the most valuable part of the correspondence to the researchers of the history of Estonian choral music and the active choir conductors. One particularly interesting letter was sent to Laasmäe by Vettik in August 1964.<sup>48</sup> Here Vettik is explaining in great detail how to perform Mihkel Lüdigi's song "Koit" – the traditional opening song of the song celebrations. "Laulud nüüd lähevad kaunimal kõlal vägevail vooludel üle me maa /the opening line of the song, describing how song, like a river, is flowing over our land/ must be sung in one breath", Vettik explains. He warns against retardation i.e. slowing down, as this would change the point of the message!

Vettik has no mercy for the authorities and shows where Ernesaks made a mistake that all the others are now repeating. The last accord of Ernesaks' own song "Laine tõuseb" /The Waves Are Rising/ remains hesitant even in the performance of RAM, Vettik briefly notes.

Try the end of "Laine tõuseb" like this and you'll hear how the chord starts ringing: had it ended on *pp*, the chord would have been excellent. But *ff* remains too thin.



Figure 1. Vettik showing Laasmäe how to sing the end of Gustav Ernesaks' song "Laine tõuseb, laine vaob", that is part V of the choral cycle "Kuidas kalamehed elavad" [How Fishermen Live].

<sup>48</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the articulation, dynamics and agogics of the repertoire taught to male choirs. 7.08.1964.

Their discussion over the arrangement of Friedrich Saebelmann's (1851–1911) “Kaunimad laulud” /Most Beautiful Songs/ is also fascinating. Vettik first introduces the history of “Kaunimad laulud”, starting from the 5th song celebration held in 1894. Thereafter he is warning against Variste's corrections, saying that his edit does not do credit to the song. Finally, he advises how a choir should perform the song.<sup>49</sup>

The Laasmäe-Vettik correspondence is solid evidence of the level of elaboration both masters applied to the performance of songs. Each musical nuance and every word in the text was polished to perfection. They were looking for truth in every line and precision in every musical phrase. These texts reflect how meticulously choral conductor and teacher Tuudur Vettik analysed each composition.

#### *4.3. Tuudur Vettik on the persecution of intellectuals and his own fate. Creative mind vs. Soviet reality*

Persecutions destroyed Tuudur Vettik's life forever. It is but natural that this experience followed Vettik like a shadow, shaping his emotional life and career. In his correspondence, too, he kept returning to the same haunting topic. Tuudur Vettik's court file gives an idea of the horrors of the Soviet repressive system. Little details, characterizing the violence committed against him, allow us to make a generalization that in reality thousands of people suffered from mass deportation, imprisonment and the overall atmosphere of terror.

The system did not get enough from Vettik's imprisonment in 1950. When he was finally released in 1956 and could return home, he had to wait years for his rehabilitation. The Supreme Court of the Estonian SSR terminated the criminal case against Tuudur Vettik due to the absence of evidence two years after the “thaw”. This was 12 years after Vettik's return from the prison, where he had been sent “for his crimes”. What a groundlessly convicted man, who had done his time for nothing, must have felt, can be sensed from one of his particularly sarcastic letters to Laasmäe, where the underlined words give proof of his great bitterness. For nothing had really changed by the end of the 1960s. The Soviet order was prevailing and party committees were still eager and active. Of course, we cannot fully rule out the possibility that underlining expresses the writer's irony and supremacy over the law-obedient office-bearers:

*Dear Roland!*

*First let me tell you that the ESSR Supreme Court fully rehabilitated me on January 24.*

*[...]*

*An interesting story for you:*

*On January 15, 1951 the war tribunal sentenced me 25 + 5 years. With all rights removed.*

*On February 8, 1951 the navy tribunal replied to me (on my application to reduce punishment), that my crimes were so severe that any reduction was out of question.*

*Om March 2, 1955 the navy tribunal removed 15 years -10 remained. On January 24,*

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<sup>49</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the arrangement and performance methods of “Kaunimad laulud”. 3.10.1974.

1968 the general committee of the Supreme Court of the ESSR nullified all verdicts saying that my activities at that time lacked any elements of crime. The Special Commission of the General Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union nullified the sentence, restored my rights and released me. This legal statement is now returning me also my confiscated property. It seem like a cruel fairy-tale, doesn't it? T. Vettik<sup>50</sup>

After returning from the Siberian prison camp, Vettik found himself in a new, changed environment. His surprising resourcefulness with solving daily problems in the Soviet period requires a separate study. However, one vivid example of this is how Roland Laasmäe had to fight unbelievable obstacles to subscribe his teacher to the Tartu newspaper *Edasi*. This local newspaper, belonging to the category of regional and town newspapers, developed into the most awake and open-minded newspaper in 1960–1970, exuding the brightness and boldness of thought of the old university town. Despite censorship and ideological monitoring, there was always something worth reading and pondering over in the newspaper. Unfortunately Soviet rules did not permit subscribing to the newspaper elsewhere. At first, the citizens of Tartu were able, after long hours of queuing, to subscribe to the paper at another address or to redirect the paper initially sent to their own address.

This became the core topic of Vettik's and Laasmäe's correspondence in 1970. It seems that Laasmäe could order the newspaper for Vettik after all, since in his letter, dated December 8, the maestro thanks his younger colleague for the results, which was obviously the payment receipt, calling him *Good Soldier Roland* in the context of the subscription campaign. "However, losses have been borne at the battle. The 10 rouble banknote enclosed by Vettik in the envelope had been taken by someone who had read the letter. "And I promised you", Vettik mocked, that "you may buy yourself a drink for what remains of the money. Now you have to do without booze. Bloody hell!" Next year the subscription of the *Edasi* newspaper was even more difficult. "All taps tightly closed", Laasmäe reported. "Now I'm chasing the editor-in-chief and the senior secretary. They are celebrating Teachers' Day now. Guess I'll have a discussion with them on Monday. And I will definitely also see Miss Accountant General. See, the problem now is that I seem to lack ammunition."<sup>51</sup>

The same topic continues in several subsequent letters, even at the beginning of the next year. Laasmäe asks Vettik, if the dear *Edasi* is doing him home visits. The letter is concluded by an enigmatic sentence: "These days you won't be even allowed to write 8 there!"<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about the preparations of his Tartu concert; overview of his persecution history. 04.02.1968.

<sup>51</sup> Vettik to Laasmäe about issues related to the subscription of the *Edasi* newspaper to Tallinn and its reception there. 8.12.1970; Laasmäe to Vettik about matters related to the subscription of *Edasi* to Tallinn. 16.12.1970; Laasmäe to Vettik about the subscription to *Edasi* and the year 1972 action programme. 2. 10. 1971.

<sup>52</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about problems related to moving house. 13.01.1971.

#### 4.4. The Laasmäe -Vettik friendship. Confidential discussions on personal topics

Their letters are largely personal, even intimate. Friendship and the opportunity to be outspoken in letters might have substituted for social rejection. Laasmäe-Vettik write about their closest family – daughter, wives. Personal topics alternate with professional discussions on the contents and form of musical compositions, the repertoire of song celebrations and the malevolence or oddity of the actions of those who put together the programme and that of other Soviet-minded figures.

Laasmäe's and Vettik's private correspondence had a therapeutic effect on both lives. It healed the soul of Vettik and provided emotional ease for Laasmäe in his battle with a severe illness. They wrote openly about their family life. The touching emotionality and mutual trust present in the communication of two friends becomes particularly strong when either one is down with an illness. Vettik suffered from health problems in September 1967 and Laasmäe organised his transport to Tartu to see doctors. Back in those days there were excellent special hospitals for VIP patients, but Vettik, although a merited artist, was not eligible to become their patient. Therefore Laasmäe arranged appointments with doctors, organised transport and booked Vettik a room in the Park Hotel, so that he could *start his treatment the very next day*.<sup>53</sup>



Figure 2. Tuudur Vettik and Roland Laasmäe. 1964. Photo: Harald Tikk.

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<sup>53</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about organising his journey to Tartu for treatment. 24. 09.1967.

Complete trust was of utmost importance for both. Vettik needed Laasmäe's advice as well, but even more so a human touch after what he had been put through in prison under the unjust Soviet system.

Although no-one else except the two of them read the letters back in those days, we can conclude that the correspondence contained elements affecting the whole society and its ways. Suggestive choir concerts, taking place as a result of their joint efforts, is an indicator of that. The song days and celebrations, organised by mutual involvement of both friends, were definitely shaped by their communication, as the song celebrations, irrespective of the attempts of the Soviet authorities to create something *socialist in content and national in form*, succeeded in maintaining the national touch in both contents and form.

### **5. The language of Laasmäe's and Vettik's correspondence as a reflector of daily reality**

Analysing the vocabulary and message of Vettik's and Laasmäe's correspondence, the researcher faces a question: to what extent is their language reflecting the daily reality of the two? This is a cultural-semeiotic topic requiring a separate linguistic analysis and is not the primary topic of this research. It is our topic to the same extent music culture is connected with texts. In choral singing this connection is tight and live. Juri Lotman has said that "culture in general can be addressed as a text. However, it is most important to emphasise that this is an extremely intricate text, forking into the hierarchy of "texts in texts" and forming complex intertwining" (Lotman 2009). It was characteristic for Laasmäe and Vettik not to be explicit when giving opinions; instead, they used allegories (this was the style of the era, when direct expression was risky). However, their critical attitude towards the Soviet era was obvious. Among other reasons, their Estonian-minded attitude was shaped by the fact that "it was difficult to graft Soviet values to Estonian intellectuals who were born and raised in the western cultural space" (Karjahärm and Luts 2005:142).

The first impression from the linguistic analysis of the correspondence is that this is a simple, even colloquial (*vs* spoken language) use of language. Taking a closer look reveals resemblance of the letters to an oratorio, where every phrase carries an important message that is frequently repeated (*vs* underlined in a sentence). An important role is played by the hidden meaning between the lines, more in Vettik's letters, less in Laasmäe's. Discussing music, they're simultaneously sharing opinions on everything else that was surrounding them in those days. In today's era of e-mails, when most of the letters exchanged are dry and often say nothing (*vs* meaningless), experiencing the depth of Laasmäe's and Vettik's letters has almost a purifying effect.

Their letters also contain silence – the Estonia people who had been living under foreign occupation, possessed a special skill to keep silent or use allegories. The author's attention was caught by both – mutually agreed silence (no words

were required to understand one another) and the use of scant phrases and hints or just names. The tone and hidden meaning between the lines vividly speak of the enormous pressure prevalent in those days. The same idea is expressed by Hungarian writer Sándor Márai, who describes Soviet power as a regime “that prohibited not only the freedom of speech and writing, but also the freedom of free silence” (Márai 2006:344) Then, however, something unexpected happened – people obtained the ability to *talk in silence*. Accepting Aili Aarelaid’s explanation, the activation of a socio-psychological defence mechanism was imperative (Aarelaid 2000:759).

A close study of the letters reveals the richness of the Estonian language and both – Laasmäe and Vettik – took care to have an occasional good laugh as well! How someone “is giving viru valge (a vodka brand) a hard whipping” or „surely the streets of our town [Tartu] are not afraid of horse dung” (Laasmäe). The author of this dissertation is of the opinion that such sentences deserve a place in the Estonian language textbooks. Laasmäe’s extraordinary sense of humour is described in Elvi Alekand’s interview, where she’s sharing her recollections on Tartu’s unique choir conductor Roland Laasmäe.<sup>54</sup>

In their letters both Laasmäe and Vettik sometimes use a language that can be considered, with reservations, as cryptic: speaking of one thing, another is in fact expressed. What is written and what the author thinks doesn’t always coincide. Such “cryptic expression” was peculiar to the Soviet times: reading newspapers, people attempted to interpret the mirror image of a text, to guess the author’s connotations and allegories. As an example let me quote the first sentence of one of Laasmäe’s letters<sup>55</sup>: “*The Browning feast is coming to an end – and together with this arrives dizziness from achievements !!!*”

What he was referring to was the celebration of the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution that was always carried out with pompous glorification of the Soviet power. His choice of the word “browning” probably makes an allusion to the so-called revolutionary holiday that people liked mocking as “revolver holiday”. But it is equally possible that Laasmäe used the allegory to make a reference to the totalitarian nature of the occupying power. ‘Dizziness from achievements’ may be an ironic reference to the fact that the authorities took great effort in beautifying a completely different daily reality. Actual reality allowed the western world to adopt a new term after WWII: the Soviet Union – life behind the Iron Curtain.

Using the culture-semiotic terminology of Prof. Lotman again, this correspondence allows us to draw a conclusion that the Laasmäe-Vettik letters open up a model of the then world – “projection of reality on the level of language.” (Lotman 2009). Neither Laasmäe nor Vettik was straightforward, they preferred using allegories (this was the style of the era, as it was risky to be outspoken). However, their critical attitude towards the Soviet period and everything it entailed is clearly

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<sup>54</sup> Author’s interview with Elvi Alekand. 28. 11.2010.

<sup>55</sup> Laasmäe to Vettik about the organization of his Tartu concert in January 1968. 10.11.1967.



perceived. Their Estonian-minded attitude was also shaped by the fact that “it was difficult to graft Soviet values onto Estonian intellectuals who were born and raised in the western cultural space” (Karjahärm and Luts 2005:142.)

## **6. Continuity of culture. Schools as bearers of continuity**

In conclusion, the author confirms her viewpoint that the correspondence of Vettik and Laasmäe largely contributes to the understanding of the meaning and role of the great names in Estonian history of culture, the developers of the choral music tradition and the creative intellectuals in shaping Estonian socio-cultural processes. Their correspondence also tells today’s researcher that every strong school is the bearer of continuity. A number of Vettik’s students, such as Roland Laasmäe, Roman Toi, Voldemar Rumessen and Ants Üleoja are the teachers of today’s generation of choir conductors. The teaching of conductor Laasmäe is carried on by the Tartu male choir *Gaudeamus* established by him. By sharing experience and views on the interpretation of choral music, the letters matured the professionalism and world outlook of both correspondents. Choir conducting is not merely about conducting a choir; it is primarily the communication of one’s own principles and world outlook to a large number of people.

One of the main issues that it has been possible to study by means of analysing the correspondence of Tuudur Vettik and Roland Laasmäe, is the survival of cultural schools and the survival mechanisms in the Soviet period. In the area of science and culture, schools – the alliances of like minds and pursuits, where a student carries on and enriches his teacher’s heritage – play a special role. The battle of the Soviet regime against “bourgeois nationalism” was targeted primarily at uprooting this continuity. Yet the achievements of the Republic of Estonia outlasted – in a well-concealed manner – the years of Soviet occupation.

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