

# IDENTITY AND MENTAL WELL-BEING: A CASE STUDY OF THE ESTONIAN VIKERLASED LGBTQ+ MIXED CHOIR\*

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## ABSTRACT

The act of making music together serves to connect people, creating a sense of belonging and unity while being a powerful tool to facilitate mental well-being. This case study concentrates on member motivation and how this is related to their participation in the Estonian LGBTQ+ mixed choir Vikerlased, with research questions being focused on the political and psychological identity aspects of group singing. Data collection was carried out by means of participatory observation, a questionnaire, and in-depth and focus group interviews. The findings suggest that singing in an LGBTQ+ choir serves multiple functions for its members, serving to support identity, maintain social, institutional, and musical aspects of participation, and promote mental well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** LGBTQ+ • choral singing • group identity • mental well-being • Gay Pride

## INTRODUCTION

As the act of singing together fosters a sense of togetherness amongst those people who share the same or a similar identity (Bohlman 2001: 20–21), it is often done in groups, for example in community choirs. Group singing brings many social benefits, such as the

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establishment and deepening of friendships, the strengthening of a sense of belonging, and increased community engagement, making community choirs strong resources for developing norms, networks and social capital, facilitating collective action. Such choirs also offer participants the means to celebrate and transmit their collective cultural identities. (Bird 2017: 194) This article will investigate the reasons behind LGBTQ+ people joining a community choir. It asks the research questions, what motivates participants to sing in the Vikerlased choir, and how does singing together relate to the political and psychological aspects of their identities?

According to Julianne Brauer (2019 [2018]: 151), listening to music – and making it in the form of choral singing – is both an act of cultural self-affirmation and of identity construction. This makes it a great tool for uniting people whose personal sexual, gender, ethnic or other identities might be contained within a larger framework of identities. Such social groups can be based on various factors or shared characteristics, which people use to categorise themselves and which support them in many senses. According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) this firstly provides a sense of belonging: being part of a group instils feelings of connection and unity, serving to provide comfort to individuals and demonstrate to them that they are not alone in their experiences. Secondly, people can gain a sense of purpose as group affiliations often have shared goals or missions. Thirdly, there is the advantage of added self-worth: becoming affiliated with a group tends to help boost self-esteem, as individuals derive pride in group achievements. Fourthly, there is the identity aspect as a framework is provided which can help to provide understanding of oneself within the context of a larger community. In all, social identities help people to define who they are based on shared attributes, values, or goals.

Ideas of social or group identity are closely related to the theory of intersectionality. The term intersectionality is used to refer to interactions between gender, ethnic background, and other categories that relate to differences in individual lives, social practices, and institutional arrangements, and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Davis 2008). Here, the aim of an intersectional approach is to reflect on which factors can be relevant within a particular context, and within a specific socio-historical context (Saeidzadeh 2023: 191). We analysed how, within a community choir, different personal identities are merged in order to achieve a joint goal, both for personal satisfaction and, socially, to achieve a degree of soft activism, which is not based on a direct confrontation but rather uses culture to evoke societal changes (Bao 2021: 195). In such circumstances, singing becomes a discursive practice situated in particular social relationships and locations that are a product of a complex intersection of culture, class, gender, etc., in lived experience (Ballinger and Payne 2000, cited in Dillane et al. 2018: 6).

The group's repertoire becomes "our music" which, according to Philip Bohlman (2001: 20–21), is a mighty weapon because it is shared, not owned. It becomes a means of communication both for people within the group and also for the wider society in the fight to be in a marginalising society.

As a marginalised group, LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> individuals can be more susceptible to mental health issues than their heterosexual counterparts (Harris 2022: 142). They are at risk of so-called minority stress, which causes mental health problems through social stressors such as stigma, prejudice, homophobia and bullying (Meyer 2003: 674). Previous studies (for example Ceatha et al. 2019; Soenyun 2019) have demonstrated that collective

music-making is an effective tool for improving mental well-being by creating safe and empowering environments.

Although there has been recent growth in mixed LGBTQ+ choirs, there is still comparatively little research on them (Bird 2017: 195) that links the aspects mentioned above. Hopefully this research will help to fill the knowledge gap in this field.

## VIKERLASED LGBTQ+ MIXED CHOIR IN LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

The LGBTQ+ mixed choir Vikerlased was founded in 2017, growing out of a gathering of Estonian gay Christians. Today the choir includes participants from different backgrounds, ranging from recent high school graduates to retirees. Altogether, the choir has approximately twenty members and, until spring 2023, was led by Keio Soomelt, a professional conductor. According to the interview with Soomelt (FM: September 2022), the choir's name has a symbolic meaning for Estonians, as well as for LGBTQ+ people. First, the name tracks back to the eponymous opera of 1928 by the Estonian composer Evald Aav (1900–1939), which is considered to be the opening salvo of the Estonian national opera (Mikk 1999). Second, it alludes to the Estonian word *vikerkaar* (rainbow), which links the name to the LGBTQ+ community's rainbow symbol. Third, it also refers to the Vikings, warlike Scandinavian seafarers of the 8th to 11th centuries AD.

In Estonia, Vikerlased represents the first long-term, stable, public musical collective in which LGBTQ+ identity plays an important role. The choir's history is still relatively short compared to some of its international counterparts, which emerged during the 1970s as a response to the gay liberation movement and the second-wave feminist movement. The Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses traces the beginning of the movement to 1975, when the Anna Crusis Women's Choir was formed in Philadelphia. In 1978, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was established, becoming the first chorus to include the word gay in its name. In the following years, many other choirs were founded in cities such as New York City, Dallas, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago. (GALA Choruses n.d.) In Western Europe and the United States, choral singing has been widely used as a vehicle to relay a message of social inclusion for minority and underrepresented groups such as LGBTQ+ (Hayes 2008: 64–65; Bird 2017: 195). By the beginning of the 2000s there were already over two hundred community choirs worldwide which associated themselves with the LGBTQ+ community, incorporating over 10,000 singers (Hayes 2008: 64). Over the decades, in Western countries, such choirs have become important institutions for LGBTQ+ culture.

One of Vikerlased's goals is "to give voice to the LGBT+ community in a positive and empowering way through choral singing" (Estonian LGBT Association 2020), with the reasons behind the establishment of the group resonating with the reasons for the establishment of similar choirs in the Western cultural sphere both in the 1970s and more recently. The reason why public LGBTQ+ cultural institutions started to emerge in Estonia only in the late 1980s lies in Estonia's Soviet past, i.e. due to the censorship of self-expression and the criminalisation of male homosexuality (Talalaev 2010: 111; Koppel 2022: 131). The establishment of public LGBTQ+ cultural institutions became possible after the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991 and its orientation into

the European political and cultural space. Liberation from the Soviet Union gave rise to a rapid progression through those socio-cultural processes that had taken decades to emerge in Western societies, and which the newly independent Estonia used as a model. The new constitution and laws decriminalising homosexuality in 1992 (Talalaev 2010: 111) and restoring the freedom of assembly (Talalaev 2022) created an opportunity for people to express LGBTQ+ identity and engage in cultural activism, i.e., to achieve social change through cultural activities. However, when compared with many Western countries, people in Estonia had a significantly shorter period in which to adapt to the public presence of LGBTQ+ people, a process that is still ongoing. Same sex marriage, for example, was legalised only in 2024.

### *LGBTQ+ Pride in a Post-Soviet Context*

An important opportunity to express LGBTQ+ identity both locally and globally is provided by the concept of LGBTQ+ Pride. In the Western world, Gay Pride has been an important symbol of the LGBTQ+ community for over half a century. The beginning of Pride festivals is associated with the Stonewall riots of 1969 in which LGBTQ+ people resisted police violence in Greenwich Village, New York City. Although similar uprisings took place in other US cities at the same time, the Stonewall events evolved into a symbol that annual Gay Pride marches still celebrate (Armstrong and Cragge 2006: 724–725). The first Gay Pride was held in 1970 on the anniversary of the riots as a denial of ‘gay shame’. Today the concept of Pride has become widely recognised, and similar festivals are celebrated all over the world. Marches, concerts, art exhibitions, and conferences are all held as Pride events.

The first Pride event to be celebrated in Estonia, Tallinn took place in 2004, 35 years after Stonewall. Pride marches were organised until 2007, after which because of negative attention at the time the next generation of activists replaced it with a cultural programme including concerts, workshops, exhibitions and film screenings. The march took place again in 2017 and turned out very well, exceeding the hopes of the organisers. It attracted a large number of participants and supporters. The decisions that led to the Pride march being cancelled and then reinstated, also point to changing values among activists due to socio-political circumstances (see, for example, Uibo 2019). As the first of this article’s authors recalls from the period of her advocacy work with the Estonian LGBT Association, the organisers deliberately avoided the word parade in fear of it being associated with the compulsory 1 May and October parades of the Soviet period, instead using the word procession. Although Soviet parades and the Pride march are completely different types of event – with the former being obligatory, organised from the top down by the Soviet officials, while the latter was voluntary and organised from the bottom up by activists – the organisers were afraid that some people would perceive them as similar.

Estonia's long-standing choral singing tradition was another essential aspect when it came to the founding of Vikerlased, giving the LGBTQ+ community the opportunity to participate openly in the national Song and Dance Celebration (SDC). This is a quinquennial event of nationwide importance in which choirs across the country come together to sing in celebration of Estonian culture, thereby simultaneously expressing the national and choral singing identity of the participants.

The SDC tradition dates back to 1869 and is associated strongly with the national awakening and cultural emancipation of Estonians (Kuutma 1996). According to recent statistics, there are 1,262 choirs in Estonia (Statistics Estonia 2024). Most of those choirs aspire to perform at the SDC, which brings together approximately 30,000 singers. The festivities start with a march to the SDC grounds in a ceremonial procession which starts at Freedom Square in central Tallinn. The SDC is important for all participants, from choral singers to the audience, and it also expresses national unity, whether for the audience in front of the stage or for the singers under the great singing arch.<sup>2</sup> According to a 2013 survey, a total of 96% of Estonians regard the SDC as an important event, including 63% who see it as being very important. Almost half (49%) of the population participate as a singer, dancer, conductor, or organiser at least once in their lives (Maatee 2014: 274). In 2003 the tradition of song festivals was included in UNESCO's list of masterpieces of oral and spiritual heritage (Lauristin and Vihalemm 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

Data collection was carried out by means of participatory observation, a questionnaire, and in-depth and focus group interviews. This meant participation in the choir by the first of the two authors – as an insider within the local LGBTQ+ community – in May and June 2022. This includes participation at the Helsinki Pride concert of 30 June 2022. This position, when combined with previous acquaintance with many of the people involved, enabled the author to establish a trusting relationship with the participants and to observe group dynamics. About a month after the concert, the author conducted a one-hour in-depth interview with the conductor and, three months after the concert, a ninety-minute focus group interview with ten choir members, eight of whom also performed at the Pride concert. They expressed different gender and sexual identities, and age groups, and worked across a wide range of sectors, from education to the private sector. To thank the choir for taking part in the research, the second author gave a forty-five-minute workshop on performance anxiety prior to the focus group interview.

The questions for the focus group interview were divided into four main blocks: 1) musical identity and experience; 2) LGBTQ+ identity, including its expression through group singing and the meaning of the performances; 3) performance anxiety, both within the context of Vikerlased and more generally; 4) the music itself, i.e. the repertoire. Similar topics were explored in the in-depth interview with the conductor, but with a greater focus on the conductor's other professional activities.

The second author observed both the rehearsal and the concert. With the consent of choir members, she also made a video recording of the concert and subsequently used

the footage to make additional notes on the performance. She also gathered data via a questionnaire in the form of a quantitative study. Due to the use of different methodological approaches, these statistical results were systematically analysed in an article by Marju Raju and Brigitta Davidjants (2024).

Material from the interviews was analysed by the first author using qualitative content analysis (Bowen 2009). Such an approach meant a careful line-by-line decoding of information gathered from the interviews and an inductive mapping out of the emergent categories. Subsequently, the authors identified and related the overarching themes to the main research questions: motivation for participation in the LGBTQ+ choir for participants within the Estonian LGBTQ+ community, and its relation to the political and psychological identity aspects of singing together. The analysis was positioned within the local cultural and historical context.

During analysis the most of the participants were anonymised, other than the conductor who is a public figure in the Estonian LGBTQ+ community, and excluding two members – Margit and Riin – who requested not to be anonymised. Only adult participants were included in the study. The manuscript's first draft was shared with the participants and adjustments were made based upon their comments. Such a process followed the feminist principle of viewing research participants as equal co-creators of academic knowledge (Oras 2008: 17). The research was backed up with permission from the Regional Ethics Committee at the University of Tartu (No 374/T1).

## FINDINGS

According to the results from qualitative content analysis, four main categories emerged from the interviews: 1) individual and group identity as motivation for joining and participating in the choir; 2) the uniting nature of national or religious symbols (the SDC and the church) and LGBTQ+ institutions (the Pride festival); 3) the positive effect on mental well-being; and 4) the role of music. Each of these categories is the subject of a more detailed description below.

### *Individual and Group Identity and Its Effect on Motivation*

There was an interview with Keio [Soomelt, the conductor] in the news, on some media channel, which made me think, 'Wow! What a cool choir!' The astonishment also has something to do with the fact that I simply don't know any gay people. And I thought, 'Damn! I've got to start somewhere.' Since I knew Keio from Rakvere, I wrote to him saying, 'You know, I'd like to come and sing in your choir.' (FM: October 2022, Inri)

In following section, Vikerlased's group dynamics are explored, concentrating on the diverse personal identities which come together in shared group identity and the socially inclusive community function of the choir.

Recent academic research on sexuality suggests that we are in a post-gay period, meaning that activists today are motivated less by drawing boundaries to keep out members of the dominant group and more by building bridges between different

groups (Ghaziani 2011: 99; Bird 2017: 194). In Estonia, too, we have seen the gradual disappearance of clubs aimed at groups with a specific sexual identity (such as separate clubs for gays or lesbians), because carrying a different gender or sexual identity have become increasingly irrelevant for today's young people. In their leisure activities, people tend to interact more with people of their own age. Considering the choir's level of diversity, a remarkable fact emerges: the choir has successfully united people across different LGBTQ+ identities, as well as across widely different age groups and professions. This has created a group identity that was mentioned by interviewees as being of equal importance to their individual identities. Keio Soomelt (FM: September 2022) also notes the inherent social diversity:

I have a youth choir with more or less high school-aged members. The members of my mixed [county] choir tend to be people who are nearing retirement, or are already retirees. In terms of age, these groups are homogeneous, which means that communication in the group is more even. In contrast, the age differences in Vikerlased are quite large... The group's dynamics, the way in which its members communicate and relate to each other, is completely different.

While participants spoke during the group interview about the need for a shared identity, the responses to the questionnaire suggested a desire to define their unique personal identities. They used different combinations of the following options: male, female, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, asexual/agender, and intersex. Two respondents also added non-binary and pansexual to clarify their answer in a free-form box.

Therefore, both membership in the general LGBTQ+ group as well as the opportunity to maintain a detailed definition of personal gender and sexual identity can be considered important. Here, probably, the choir's mixed-voice format, which requires different vocal groups, encourages more significant social variation. Similarly, the Glamaphones mixed choir from New Zealand, for example, has brought together people of very different sexual identities who would probably not otherwise have come into contact (Bird 2017: 197).

Participants in the choir had been singing there for an average of two years. This makes the choir relatively stable within the Estonian context in which community choirs are characterised by a high level of mobility for their singers (Fridolin 2017: 80). Most participants became involved in the choir after hearing about it from acquaintances. For example, Ella says: "I was told by a friend that they had seen the choir at [the LGBTQ+ film festival] Festheart, and, wow! There's a LGBTQ+ choir in Estonia!" (FM: October 2022, Ella). Participants also mentioned seeing an interview on television with the conductor or a clip of the SDC's ceremonial procession. Relevant social media channels were also mentioned (such as LGBTQ+ groups in Facebook). Two of the participants could be counted among the choir's founders.

The choir's social diversity partially stems from the lack of LGBTQ+ communal activities in Estonia, and the motivation of Vikerlased's members corresponds to that of various gay choirs in the West since the 1970s (Eesti LGBT Ühing 2020). As Krõõt, one of the choir's members, put it:

I came, and I want to stay because there really are some nice people here. There's already this joy of creation... It's good to be here because you feel supported and

cared for and, of course, encouraged. That's the most important aspect. (FM: October 2022, Krõõt)

Keio Soomelt (FM: September 2022) also emphasised the social aspect and places the community to the fore, expressing willingness to accept people in the choir without an audition, similarly to other such LGBTQ+ choirs (see Bird 2017: 197):

As is natural, the group supports its members; a choir always has multiple functions and, in the case of Vikerlased, the community function is perhaps even stronger than in other choirs. You really have a community of people who see the world and understand things the same way as you do, and with whom you meet regularly. It's not just a rehearsal, you can also talk afterwards. In short, this social, community aspect is very important... When we have a person from our community who wants to come and stay, it is very unlikely that we would turn them down.

To be motivated to belong to a social group, the individual needs the group to help them fulfil three interpersonal needs: inclusion, control, and affection (Schutz 1958). Inclusion was also an important factor for Vikerlased. The participants emphasised that, in the choir, they are not gender stereotyped. For example, women do not have to wear a dress during performances, and the sexual and gender identity of participants is respected, whilst in traditional choirs, according to interviewees (FM: October 2022), members of the LGBTQ+ community usually remain undeclared, and traditional gender representation is required. A good example of inclusion takes place during the introductions round at choir retreats. In addition to their names, participants also state their preferred pronouns.<sup>3</sup> This helps to make natural any non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. Soomelt similarly emphasised the act of consciously creating a safe space:

With my classical choir conductor's education, I had to rethink my vocabulary a good deal during the first few months. When you have been trained with classical choirs as a so-called classical choir conductor then you're used to saying: 'men sing', 'women sing', 'male choir', and 'female choir'. But with Vikerlased you quickly understand that it's entirely normal to focus instead on tenors, basses, sopranos and altos. We don't really need to add a gender reference to a vocal group. (FM: September 2022)

The need to maintain motivation is intrinsic to artistic groups such as choirs. Within these, at least, the conductor must assure an "animated atmosphere [and] conditions of maximum aesthetic and affective pleasure" (Amato et al. 2008). In addition, when defining the choir in subcultural terms, the importance of a charismatic and caring leader comes to the fore, here in the personage of the conductor Keio. Several participants emphasised the fact that the interview with Keio on television inspired them to join. They also mentioned the rehearsals and the conductor's warm and witty manner as easing performance anxiety.

However, while the conductor's charismatic personality attracts people to join, it is the choir's safe space that keeps them singing. All of the interviewees confirmed that, even when the performance does not go quite so well, Keio still keeps on encouraging them. In this sense, the conductor's role in Vikerlased is similar to that of amateur choirs and other musical collectives, in which overall management, the act of providing praise,

and employing motivation skills are more important than manual skills (Kelley 2016: 143; Bonshor 2017: 155–156). One of the choir members, Kelli, adds:

What really elevates my spirits is the way in which Keio's eyes smile after every song, which somehow makes you feel appreciated. It's like – even if there is something which goes completely belly-up – this makes me feel really good. It's really calming, supportive, and motivating. (FM: October 2022, Kelli)

The choir has other strengths as well. Vikerlased enjoys a high level of motivation amongst its members, along with organised and inclusive leadership, as well as a committed choirmaster and other management figures. This is why Vikerlased is able to follow the tenet that states that responsibility for musical work in the choir should be shared between choristers and conductor (Zander 2003: 147, via Amato and Amato 2008). All of these aspects facilitate member communication outside choir rehearsals, such as in social media chat groups, at joint events, and at choir retreats. As a whole, the picture that emerges of the desire to sing or the search for community would not on their own have sufficed to form Vikerlased. Instead, the symbiosis of music and a supportive, inclusive community attracts members with diverse LGBTQ+ identities and keeps them engaged. The members of the choir are united by a common social identity, and singing only strengthens the sense of unity. Similar results have been confirmed by other studies of choral singing (Särg 2023: 136).

#### *The Institutions: The Song and Dance Celebration, Pride and the Church*

I think so many of us have been made to believe that [LGBTQ+ identity] is the opposite of patriotism. But it's really not like this in LGBT. I tell myself – as do others – that I am Estonian, I am LGBT, and I am also a patriot in a positive way. (FM: October 2022, Riin)

Various local and global institutions – SDC, Pride, and the Lutheran church – were systematically brought up by the participants. This finding illustrates the nuanced nature of the intersection between identities, challenging stereotypes of mutually exclusive identity such as religion and LGBTQ+, and promoting inclusivity through cultural, LGBTQ+, and religious expression.

The importance of the SDC for Vikerlased stood out quite clearly within the context of the complex political situation, and also provided an opportunity for patriotism in a positive and inclusive way. During the SDC of 2019, the popularity of the Estonian Conservative People's Party (using the Estonian acronym, EKRE) was increasing. The rhetoric being employed by its leaders sought to incite conflict between social groups as well as enmity towards LGBTQ+ people, invoking stereotypes critical of the latter (Uued Uudised 2023). Similar views were expressed to oppose the participation of Vikerlased in the 2019 SDC, with party members publishing a spate of articles about how the presence of the choir at the festival would be inappropriate, often using false information and derogatory language (Uued Uudised 2019).

Choir members were aware of the supposed conflict between their LGBTQ+ identity and their national identity, and they challenged this. Participating in the SDC as an openly LGBTQ+ choir allowed participants to feel accepted in society as LGBTQ+ peo-

ple and, at the same time, express their patriotic feelings as Estonians. Margit summed up the topic as follows: "Participating in the SDC was a very powerful experience. It was basically the sum of the Estonian feeling of national unity with LGBT people who have joined." (FM: October 2022, Margit) Soomelt confirmed these thoughts:

I am convinced that LGBT people were always at the song festival from the very first one. It's just that they've never organised there or been represented as a group. For us, this is a process of normalising the LGBT community. Just as we have institution-based choirs, such as the Tax Administration Choir, and profession-based ones, such as the Foresters' Choir, why not have an LGBT choir? It doesn't have to be any different from the rest. From the beginning, the question has not been whether an LGBT choir would join the SDC, but whether or not we *wanted* to join – and if we did, we would go through the process and try to be included. And we were. (FM: September 2022)

The importance of the SDC for the identity of Estonian choir singers is matched by that of the Pride festival for LGBTQ+ people. Hence, regular performances at Pride events were a must for Vikerlased. Members agreed that while it was satisfying to perform at the SDC, performance at the Pride festival was a must because, "if we are an LGBT choir, where else should we sing if not at Pride" (FM: October 2022). The importance attributed to Pride by choir members in the Estonian context illustrates how participants vicariously integrate a global phenomenon into their local experience and historical memory. The 1969 experience of limited LGBTQ+ human rights in the West resonates with many LGBTQ+ people who experienced life under Soviet rule, for example older members of Vikerlased can still remember how homosexuality was a criminal offence in Soviet Estonia. Pride was also valued by the choir's younger members, for whom openly expressing their identity is natural. Thanks to this, despite their different backgrounds, all respondents supported Pride.

For several participants, Pride performances with the choir were their first Pride experience. As they said, they had not appreciated Pride as a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community but changed their opinion after having personally experienced it as an empowering event for the community. Inri says:

I also lost my [LGBTQ+] Pride innocence this summer. I already pointed out that, in Vilnius, for years I had not been at all moved by the subject of Pride. The parade never appealed to me and seemed rather an oddity. I must admit that I completely changed my opinion... The experience was so powerful. You realise you are in such a perfect place and that you really need this march. (FM: October 2022, Inri)

Vikerlased uses music as a means to appeal for justice. The interviewees repeatedly emphasised participation in Pride as 'soft activism' (Bao 2021: 195) which empowers the broader LGBTQ+ community. They pointed out that professional singers and bands that perform at Pride events often do not represent the true community, and as is also the case with members of other LGBTQ+ mixed choirs worldwide (Bird 2017: 200–201) participants believed that seeing community members on stage sends a direct message of encouragement to LGBTQ+ people. The concept of soft activism was also supported by the claim that the choir does not want to become directly involved in politics but is ready to stand up to repressive political movements by singing at events that have

a political undertone when its members feel that they are being attacked due to their LGBTQ+ identity.

In addition to Pride and the SDC, an affiliation with the Lutheran church emerged during the discussion about values. This was surprising because, in Estonian public discourse, various Christian churches have typically been formally opposed to LGBTQ+ rights, leading to a widespread perception that religion and LGBTQ+ identity are mutually exclusive (see, for example, Meie Kirik 2024). Church was primarily mentioned as a welcoming venue in the context of positive and emotional performances, but personal religious experiences did not come out of the interviews.

The relationship with the Lutheran church reflects the fact that the choir grew out of a gathering of gay Christians, people with a Lutheran background, as mentioned in the interviews. No reference to it appeared in the choice of repertoire during the study period and neither did choir members observe any religious practices at rehearsals or during the concert, although Vikerlased had previously given three church concerts. Several participants cited these performances as being highly important, not only because of the good acoustics at the venue in question but also due to the fact that the choir was being accepted by the congregation as an LGBTQ+ choir. Carl explained it as follows:

Keio was also conducting other choirs and we held a concert together in Rakvere. At the beginning I felt a little [dubious about things], with us being gays from Tallinn who were coming to Rakvere while the other choirs were a bit more traditional. But later we sang together in a church, and I liked that combined singing. We were no longer simply gays from the city. We had come together. (FM: October 2022, Carl)

To sum up, the three institutions listed by respondents as being reflections of their identity (the SDC, Pride and the Lutheran church) are often stereotyped as being mutually exclusive (in the form of LGBTQ+ people being neither religious nor patriotic). This was clearly not the case with the choir's members. They perceived the SDC as a demonstration of their cultural patriotism, Pride as a mark of their LGBTQ+ identity, and the Lutheran church as a symbol of their religious identity.

### *Mental Well-Being and Safety*

There was this boy before Covid broke out. He came to rehearsals every Sunday wearing a lounge jacket and a rainbow tie. It seemed to me that he would most definitely not be able to walk around with a tie like that in his everyday environment. But Vikerlased's choir was a group that allowed it, and that was really nice. (FM: September 2022)

The positive effect of choral singing on people's mental well-being has been extensively studied, with the self-assessment of singers usually being the centre of attention, similar to the research being presented here (Moss et al. 2018). A positive effect can also be obtained by concentrating on the psychological, physiological, social, and community benefits of choral participation and group singing, including where marginal-

ised groups are concerned (Bird 2017: 194). Considerable mental health awareness was shown by both the singers and the conductor:

We in Vikerlased are perhaps more aware of mental health issues because we have various individuals who, on account of their sexuality or for other reasons are earnestly working on their mental health... This is discussed a good deal in our community because anxiety and depression are associated with being in the closet or discovering one's sexuality, or with all transgender issues... People might not attend rehearsals or performances for a while, saying they're having anxiety attacks at the moment... People in our community feel more comfortable being open and honest about these issues when compared to elsewhere. Our environment is already open enough that the topic comes as no surprise and does not represent any absolute taboo. (FM: September 2022)

Choir members also brought up anxiety issues, affirming that their performance anxiety subsided while they have been singing as members of Vikerlased. The conductor also emphasised the fact that he consciously works to prevent and mitigate anxiety:

If you set a requirement, such as everybody must sing without the score, then in any other small mixed choir such as that of Kadrina [a small town in north-eastern Estonia] it will above all mean a spot of bother for people, because they have to learn the score by heart. But if people are, overall, going through a difficult period or are having trouble coping, then for them it's not just a matter of learning the score. For them, those printed sheets in their hand on the stage provide a sense of security. (FM: September 2022)

With the rise of virtual communities and dating apps, the way in which many LGBTQ+ people socialise has changed in recent years (Bird 2017: 199). In that light, the safety of choral singing also came to the fore when talking about mental well-being. The choir offered its participants a safe space within the LGBTQ+ community (which, as in any social group, also has its diversity), thereby creating a framework for meeting other LGBTQ+ people. Respondents indicated in the group interview that they prefer singing in the choir to visiting LGBTQ+ clubs or Tinder as a socially less anxious environment in which to meet other people. Participants also shared the idea that, compared to, for example, typical board game nights in the LGBTQ+ community centre, a socially anxious person can sing in the choir without any forced interaction and get to know fellow choir members at a pace that suits them. Soomelt also stressed the aspect of the choir as a group of friends who regularly meet outside rehearsals (FM: September 2022). The first author of this work also noted organic and friendly communications as part of participant observations. This shows that the choir meets participants' needs for interpersonal affection and inclusion. Members feel, during the course of their collective activity, that they are supported by other people in psychological terms (Kreutz 2014: 55). Margit sums this up as follows:

I know this is important for some people because they don't want to look for dates on Tinder or in a bar. In today's busy world, you have to make quick decisions on whether or not you want to be with someone. In contrast, if you want to get to know people gradually, the choir gives you that opportunity. I have also noticed

in [LGBT] association events that when there is a film night people will come to watch the film and then leave. Here, instead, you meet regularly all the time. It's somehow relaxing. (FM: October 2022, Margit)

Participation in the choir creates an opportunity to safely declare one's sexual or gender orientation to other choir members and to the public because, as the conductor puts it, "the fact is that, from a certain point onwards, choral singing is a public activity" (FM: September 2022). Furthermore, far-right parties have made significant gains across Europe since about 2014–2015 (Dillane et al. 2018: 1–2), and Estonia is no exception. Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the support the choir was able to provide them during the difficult nine-month period in which EKRE formed part of the governing coalition (between 24 April 2019 and 26 January 2021). They felt emotionally supported by each other during rehearsals as well as when performing publicly as an LGBTQ+ choir. In addition, such a singing environment helped them to overcome stage fright, an experience which was summed up by Inri:

I've been singing in choirs practically since kindergarten, in a male choir and a mixed choir, and have constantly had to deal with stage fright. Here, I feel for the first time that I'm not afraid to sing. It has been a terribly long journey... I credit this change to the choir and the conductor. (FM: October 2022, Inri)

### *The Significance of Music*

"I have no idea how to pronounce 'Legendaarne'. But it's such a romantic Estonian song! I like its music and how it sounds!" (FM: October 2022, Carl)

In this section we will delve into the significance of music and concerts for the members of Vikerlased. We will illustrate how, for Vikerlased, music and concerts contribute not only to the artistic development of its members but also serve as a platform for mental expression which enhances motivation and enjoyment of the overall choral experience.

Firstly, the joy gained through music and public performance was emphasised as an important reason for participating in Vikerlased. The intrinsic motivation for singers to use their voices professionally and develop their artistic skills is at its peak when their efforts are rewarded with public recognition and the aesthetic pleasure of a good quality performance. On the other hand, despite personal motivation, insufficient training in singing techniques and maintaining good vocal health can place amateur choristers at higher risk of incurring a vocal injury (Rosa and Behlau 2017: 9). Therefore, the use of a professional choir repertoire intended for trained voices could lead to vocal problems.

The Vikerlased repertoire seeks to consider all of these aspects by being selected to cover the different singing abilities of the choir members. It also consists of songs that have different messages and levels of difficulty. In addition to musical parameters, the choice reflects the fact that the choir has members who do not speak Estonian: there are always some songs in English as well as the Estonian ones. The repertoire also includes certain 'gay anthems' which have a symbolic meaning for the entire community, either by reason of their subject matter, through the gender or sexual identity of the original performer, or according to other internal group codes. In the repertoire that was used at the Helsinki Pride concert, the category was represented by the songs "Seasons of

Love" (from Jonathan Larson's 1996 gay and AIDS-themed musical, *Rent*) along with "And So It Goes" (1990, Billy Joel), which speaks about forbidden love.

When the choir performs abroad, the repertoire includes a song in the local language. At Helsinki Pride this was "Summer" (*Suvi/Kesä*; 1969, Jeff Barry and Kustas Kikerpuu, original performance by The Archies), translated into Finnish by a choir member, and the Lithuanian song, "For you" (*Dél Taves*; 2001, Džordana Butkutė) as a reminder of Vilnius Pride. Due to Russia's war in Ukraine, the final concert item was the Ukrainian folk song, "Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow" (*Oi u luzi Chervona Kalyna*). Selections for performance always include Estonian songs, such as the four-part mixed choir arrangement "Legendary" (*Legendaarne*) adapted for choral song for the 2023 Youth Song Festival (composed by Peeter Kononov, arrangement by Tõnu Kõrvits, lyrics by Heiti Talvik). The varied repertoire testifies to the choir's socially active stance, which uses music to respond to cultural and political events within and close to Estonia.

The choir's music-making and repertoire are not overly complicated. They reflect an optimal balance of participant skills and the effort required for performance (Fridolin 2017: 16). An example of material that presented a challenge for the choir was the song "Legendary". Many interviewees in a focus group reported this song as being a favourite, describing it as a beautiful, powerful, heartfelt, romantic song with a nice melody and good lyrics (FM: October 2022). The positive emotions that can be derived from performance this song, and the challenge presented by the material, were also noted when commenting on the performance. This suggests that an easier or better-known repertoire is not automatically preferred in community choirs. In fact, a complex repertoire seemed to fulfil one of the principal needs that has to be met in order to keep singers motivated: the need to feel competent (Fridolin 2017: 17).

## CONCLUSIONS

Singing in Vikerlased served multiple functions for its members. The findings highlight the importance of identity, community, and the role of music in creating a supportive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. Participating in the choir supported its members in four principal respects:

- 1) By allowing maintenance of social respect, with the choir offering an opportunity to spend time with people who shared a similar, non-heteronormative identity. Participants wanted to be part of the choir because they felt that in a predominantly heteronormative world, where it is often unsafe to declare one's identity publicly, the choir provided a safe environment in which their identity was respected.
- 2) By gaining institutional respect, with the SDC, LGBTQ+ Pride, and the Lutheran church all emerging as important pillars. Participants did not see the SDC, Pride, and the church as being mutually exclusive. Rather, the three represented different aspects of their identity.
- 3) Singing in a choir helped to maintain mental well-being among choir members. The choir provided a safe platform for open discussions about mental health, with members expressing high levels of awareness of the topic and caring for each other accordingly. Participation in Vikerlased enabled individuals to declare their sexual or gender orientation safely.

4) Successful team performances of complex musical pieces offer a sense of satisfaction that would probably not be achieved by the members when singing alone. Members of Vikerlased experienced feelings of joy when working together towards the common goal of successfully performing a challenging repertoire.

As with other LGBTQ+ choirs (Bird 2017; Dillane et al. 2018: 6), singing in Vikerlased came to represent acts of performed solidarity, as the members saw singing in the choir as a form of soft activism. Choral singing within an LGBTQ+ context can be intrinsically politicised, even if members do not directly aim to present a political message. Participation in the choir goes beyond a mere musical activity, instead acting as a catalyst for mental well-being, community support, and self-expression, exemplifying the broader concept of community music, where music plays a central role in creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

## NOTES

1 An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and all the other identities that fit under the wide umbrella of sexual and gender diversity.

2 Author's correspondence with the Estonian Song and Dance Celebration Foundation, February 6, 2023.

3 Although there is no explicit gender distinction in Estonian, the choir also includes English speakers and the working language is sometimes English. Regardless of the language spoken, this approach serves as a way for members to express their identities.

## SOURCES

FM – Fieldwork materials from 2022 consisting of the following interviews:

September 2022 Keio Soomelt, conductor of Vikerlased, in-depth interview, September 12, 2022.

October 2022 Inri, Ella, Krõõt, Kelli, Riin, Carl, Margit – participants in focus group interview, October 16, 2022.

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