

Helen Tammemäe

We went to see the President of Estonia to talk about music, subcultures and evolving culture; Estonian self-esteem, manners and success; leaving and returning; contemporary world view and a more tolerant and optimistic society.

On what was probably the coldest day of this year's fleeting winter, I found myself walking through sunny yet freezing Park Kadriorg towards the Office of the President with a feeling of slight trepidation. My planner had been reminding me for a couple of weeks already: "Interview with the President." What a strange country we live in, I thought to myself while walking up to the Kadriorg Palace...you just take a walk to see the President. Having passed security protocol and other procedures, I was in Toomas Hendrik Ilves's office.

We had agreed beforehand to talk about culture in general. Tõnu Kaljuste had received his first Grammy the previous night. The President boasted about the music playing: "It's a group of jazz musicians that interpret 18th century Italian sacral music. I just gave this record to Kaljuste as a gift and he loved it!" He also gave his permission to talk about all and every thing. I read out the first question I had prepared, put the paper down next to my coffee cup...and that's where it remained for the rest of the interview.

Your knowledge of IT and cyber defence combined with an open attitude towards youth and contemporary culture has painted a rather innovative portrait of You as a statesman. Perhaps because of that You have not become much of a "man of the people". What has lead You to choose such a course?

I've been keeping a close eye on Estonian IT developments since the restoration of independence because already back then I saw an opportunity where we had an equal starting point to everyone else. The very first browser Mosaic appeared in 1993. Next to big countries like Finland, Germany, USA and others where there is 500 years of developed infrastructure – big roads and bridges – we were completely equal in the field of IT. I thought that it is something worth focusing on and have been doing that all the time.

As for culture... (Thinking) There's no need to be artificial – if you've enjoyed something in particular your whole life, you will continue to do so. You can't fake your cultural interests – and I really don't think about what everyone else might prefer. If I like something, I will go and see it or give it a listen, but I won't do that if it's not my cup of tea. One has to remain human even if one happens to be the President. Why should I do something I take no pleasure in?!

The establishment of the cyberspace You witnessed in the 1990s has significantly changed our cultural experiences and culture as a whole. How do You feel about this?

The community that Estonians, Germans, Americans or whoever are a part of, is not a minor group of local avangardists – it's a whole new wide space thanks to cyberroom. This kind of access has helped Estonia to become considerably more international and it's an opportunity I saw 20 years ago. Nothing compares to the feeling of breaking free from bigotry and being in sync with the rest of the world. We don't need mediators – everyone can read whatever they please.

One way to be an equal part of the world is to be present. My experience in foreign policy and European Parliament has proven that some countries might be bigger than us with a larger population and a more powerful army, but this doesn't mean they're more knowledgeable – which they sometimes tend to forget. The big ones can be dim just as well.

It is not customary for an Estonian to be open to new experiences. Can Estonian culture become more optimistic towards embracing the new?

Well, why is that there are so many successful start-ups here? There are many reasons for that. One of them is the background, the education – we've had 20 successful years of Tiigrihüpe, which means that all schools are online since 1998, and there's always the 3 per cent that want to know how stuff works. The other – and much more important – factor is that someone has already proven to be successful. We had Skype and now we have thousands of young Estonians that have seen this as a way to make a name for themselves.

It's very interesting to watch this unfold. Unlike the Silicon Valley logic where universities and companies are all in the same place and people are physically working together, we have something called the #EstonianMafia – a couple of people in Silicon Valley, some in New York and London, Jevgeni Kabanov in Tartu. They're all communicating with and helping each other. It's a wonderfully cooperative community. And this challenges the age-old stereotype of Estonians not working together or that "an Estonian's favourite dish is another Estonian". It's a very effective model and one that has particularly helped achieve success in the IT sector.

A well known person recently announced that Estonian IT accomplishments are a myth. They were trying to say that it is not true – but sorry, in this case, they have no idea what is going on in the world! Admittedly, the myth has proven to be quite something else instead; it's more like an unexpectedly successful meme. The situation may change, but at this point we have managed to tap into the collective consciousness of the world. Just like Seattle became the bastion for grunge, Estonia has a lot happening in the field of IT and this should be acknowledged!

(Gets visibly excited: "I'm completely all over the place right now!")

For example, think about how the SMS text message came to life – it was just a draft of an idea that was added to Nokia mobile phones and nobody thought anything of it. However, it gained momentum thanks to shy Finnish boys that chose to send text messages instead of calling the girls. What I want to say is that an Estonian might avoid face to face conversation, but we are still open to communication. I, too, prefer written communication – I'd rather send an SMS or e-mail than actually pick up the phone for making a call.

What could be the cultural equivalent to the Tiigrihüpe program?

(Thinks for a while.) It's difficult to say... What I see is that it's easier to break out into the world from the confines of a small culture through music rather than literature. There have been very little break-through authors like Sofi Oksanen. However, a few others have also managed to achieve this: Anselm Hollo's translations of The Czar's Madman and Professor Martens' Departure by Jaan Kross, for example. Neither of these books managed to reach the masses, however, they did receive praise from the critics. Of course, having a good working relationship with a brilliant translator is essential for making this work.

It seems to me – considering especially that Kaljuste recently received a Grammy – that Estonians need that outside approval before we are ready to give praise to our own artists.

Absolutely! It doesn't only apply to artists – we need this approval elsewhere as well. Although perhaps not always. There are two sides to this. Firstly, we don't trust ourselves enough. Arvo Pärt had to garner praise around the world before we realized here in Estonia that, oh, that's one of our own! We keep waiting for someone to come up and say that, yes, you've done a great job. The other side is the lawnmower phenomenon – as soon as someone rises above the rest, we seek to mow them down.

Is this specifically Estonian or simply human?

I wouldn't call it Estonian – it's more of a Nordic mentality in general. Maybe it's got something to do with being cut off from the rest of the world for so long. Some other cultures really support their own and take pride in the success of their people.

There's this famous Norwegian book that formulated the Law of Jante, especially famous in the Nordic countries. Part of the Law of Jante states: "You're not to think you can do something better than anyone else; you're not think you can do something differently at all." (You're not to think you are anything special. You're not to think you are as good as we are. You're not to think you are smarter than we are. You're not to convince yourself that you are better than we are. You're not to think you know more than we do. You're not to think you are more important than we are. You're not to think you are good at anything. You're not to laugh at us. You're not to think anyone cares about you. You're not to think you can teach us anything. – H.T.)

It's difficult for us to make a mark culturally outside the World Wide Web, but it's also difficult to bring the rest of the world here.

I became acquainted with Helen Sildna because 6 or 7 years ago she wrote an article on how difficult it is to get alternative or indie bands to come perform here. She mentioned a rather unknown at that time – but now famous – band that I was also familiar with called Arcade Fire.

She called it the music of the future, but doubted that any more than 300 people at best would come to see them. We don't have very many people that are aware of up-and-coming artists, so it's difficult to have variety. Who could afford the risk of investing a large sum of money into putting up a concert for a band that's famous outside but maybe not that known in Estonia? You attract only a small audience and then you're bankrupt.

Who do You think should take the risk and fight to bring international artists here?

I think Helen Sildna and her colleagues have created a suitable solution in the form of Tallinn Music Week. They invite lesser known artists, who have nonetheless achieved a certain level, and there's a chance to get acquainted with all of them.

Young artists need attention! Take Iiris, for example – she was relatively known here, but a complete unknown everywhere else. However, thanks to TMW she signed a record deal. This is also one of the ways to help out our artists.

But the problem really is that people don't have the resources to enjoy culture as much as they'd like to. How to avoid culture becoming accessible only for the elite?

In this case it is not economic elitism. To fully enjoy art and culture one requires adequate education. I attended a contemporary music event where I was seated next to a Swedish conductor. During the intermission he couldn't contain his surprise: "You have young people coming to listen to serious music? In Stockholm the audience is mainly comprised of people that already have gray hair!"

We have a thorough musical education available in Estonia. I know a family where the mother is Estonian and father British – their child turned out to be a musical prodigy so they chose to move here to provide the best elementary musical education available. In Great Britain they would have had to pay £ 25, 000 a year to a private school for that. Uncultured people are a much greater problem elsewhere.

As to the economic availability, my tastes in music and literature developed when I was a poor student – there was always a way to listen to or read something. My college radio station WKCR is still among the frontrunners in America for promoting new music. It was a sad time after leaving college – there was no Internet then and it was difficult to get access to that radio.

Many new underground internet radio stations have been established in Estonia as well in the recent years, although some of them are not paying license fees. Is there a way to correctly do these things? Or is there any need to regulate this alternative underground culture?

(Categorically) NO, NO, NO! In a speech I gave at Tallinn Music Week 2 years ago – and which got me into some hot water because I was talking about Pussy Riot before anyone else was – I mentioned that if we take a look at contemporary music, everything that is currently mainstream, has once been alternative.

Like Seattle, that gave us Pearl Jam and Nirvana – nobody could have ever guessed it would become the birthplace of grunge. Seattle is a bit like the American version on Rapla, that all of a sudden produced talented individuals such as Avandi and Eplik. Certain places create a certain constellation from time to time. For example, the founders of Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir and Hortus Musicus were born only a few days apart – you can't program this beforehand and direct culture onto a preferred path. One place can simultaneously produce a number of geniuses. We cannot get stuck in the mindset that what was previously, has to remain like that forever. It's difficult for people to get used to this.

Subcultures are thought to advocate vice, although they have managed to break certain moulds in society. How can one know when a subculture is carrying innovative values and is acceptable?

It's only possible in hindsight... The romantic image of an artist has existed since the beginning of the 19th century – Byron, Swinburne, De Quincey...they used drugs and made babies... Before that the artist was prim and proper with a patron to support him. The concept of alternative culture appeared only sometime after the publishing of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Verlaine, Baudelaire ja Rimbaud were the first literary figures to experiment with everything, including various substances – what they started has since been carried on. Now

they have all been – perhaps posthumously – domesticated, they are even read in universities.

Lou Reed began attending presidential receptions already in the 1990s. When I was young, Lou Reed was still totally a part of a subculture – playing in run down cheap bars at four in the morning. We see all the time how something new and radical becomes something accepted – it just takes time.

Is it domestication of the artist or just time catching up and certain things just don't shock anymore?

Both. Maybe you reach a certain age and can't be bothered to be shocking anymore. And maybe you have already influenced culture enough so that the norms have changed. We have witnessed this tendency for the past 200 years and it's not only about culture – when the gays started acting out against repressions in 1960s San Francisco, everyone were shocked. Now, however, the bigger part of Americans are in support of same-sex marriages – cultures change.

What do we need to do or how much time will it take for gay relationships to be accepted here?

Post-communist countries have been largely conservative, although Estonia has been very progressive in certain issues. I don't know how much time it will take... I hope not too much. There's too little of us to discriminate and persecute amongst ourselves. When I look at how much hatred and anger this question has created, I must say our society simply will not survive this intolerance against our own people. And the more I am disappointed in those that propagate this intolerance!

There isn't even room for a discussion here. How to engage sides into a dialogue when they cannot relate to each other?

It is definitely a problem we have. We need more tolerance. We can't afford these social schisms like some large nation. We must value each and every person.

A similar situation happened at the end of last year as well, between representatives of power and certain cultural public figures. Gestures to underline the opposition were used.

We are accustomed to a little exaggeration with these things – after all, we are among the most liberal countries in Europe. To say that the freedom of speech is somehow restricted and to talk about the Era of Silence... This annoys me. We have much more freedom of speech than anywhere in the Nordics. Libel is criminalized there and even in such a progressive country as Sweden an editor earned jail time for that. Here you can say whatever you want. All and every kind of protest is brilliant! Please protest, but do not say that our country is authoritarian.

What are some of the shortcomings of our creative unions and public representatives?

There are a number of arguments, there is no consensus like at the 1988 Plenum of the Creative Unions, where everyone was demanding freedom. It wasn't the case that everyone was against the Minister of Cultural Affairs – there were also important Estonian cultural figures who thought the opposite. There are also those who will not join a creative union thinking it is unjust that they receive government funding. However, this is not something that requires interference from the state – it is something the creative unions and other public figures need to discuss among themselves.

What should the state's culture policy look like?

I don't believe in regulating culture at all. Financing, of course, sets certain restrictions, but I would keep that away from the state as much as possible. The state decides the available amount of funds. Let the people agree amongst themselves on how to divide that.

Latvia has this excellent weekly called *ir*, which is one of the best publications in the Baltics. They recently published two pages of praise to Estonian cultural politics – how Estonians have done everything right and Latvians wrong. We may be very dissatisfied with our lives, but others that come from the same system think wow, unbelievable, how have They managed that?! The same self-contempt that dominates in a lot of our discussions is evidently even worse in Latvia – they have an even harder time admitting the state has done something right.

(Stands up and walks towards his computer: "Let's listen to something more alive, shall we?! I'm going to shake things up now..." Piret Pert, the communication manager at the Office of the President says: "Please, don't play your alternative rock!" THI laughs: "Oh, I will!" And cranks up the volume.)

What were the strongest cultural influences in Your youth? It seems You have remained relatively true to your preferences?

(Argues categorically) I listened to something completely different when I was young! I don't have a favourite band, I have various moods!

But what touches You personally?

(Mellows) Languages... I like it when language is used interestingly – I post a lot of witticisms in various languages on Twitter that usually nobody understands. I like writers that have a certain way with language.

Have You ever harboured any creative ambitions yourself?

I have never had any such ambitions, however, I have always written. I've also played all kinds of instruments like the piano, saxophone, guitar, but I was always more interested in reading. I was an alright artist until I became best friends with someone who turned out to be a genius –

then I just gave up. I was actually pretty good. People said that wow, you're a pretty good artist, but looking at my talented friend, I realized I'm not that good. (In jest) It was depressing to look at, although it was complete and raw talent. I've seen very few people who can actually draw that well.

As a president You probably haven't had the thought, that hey, someone else is so much better at this than I am, maybe I should just give up?

(Laughs) In this field it is not a question of talent. I simply believe in doing things better.

What can we expect from the 100th anniversary of our country? What can we achieve in five years still?

It's not about the GDP per capita, it's about other things. Estonia is one of those paradoxical countries where the correlation between wealth and happiness collapses completely. Usually people are more happier the better things are. I don't know why we keep thinking we are doing the worst?! There are places where there's much more corruption and poverty, but the people are much more happier than we are. Estonia has the lowest index of corruption in Eastern Europe and the only post-communist country that is in the so called right side of the European Union.

Maybe complaining about things is one way to make sure everything's in order? Even though it doesn't create a particularly friendly atmosphere.

I can't say how people should feel, but if everyone keeps saying day in and day out that everything is so bad... Maybe it helps to go abroad and see for yourself that things are actually not better there. But the mentality that everything here is a priori so bad, reflects poor education and maleficence or bitterness for your own personal failures.

If we compare emigration from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, we see that the numbers are 10 times bigger elsewhere. However, when I flip through the newspapers, I see something like the interview with Tõnu Kaljuste saying: "Tõnu Kaljuste stays in Estonia while the rest of the population runs off." Let's grow up and live in the real world! 2,2 million Brits reside outside of the UK in the EU. The only way to stop emigration is to close off all the borders, but this would mean that even more people will go.

Although I've heard many times from various people that students studying abroad think it stupid to return to your country, but Estonians think otherwise – they think about going home and making something happen!

Are we going to wait for the return of the scattered generation?

No, we won't. This has happened before, it has always been like this. People with initiative will return with fresh ideas. Which is why Estonia has done so well.

We have the urge to achieve something. Even in the 1980s in the Soviet Union, Estonia differed from other countries because we had ambition; issues related to democracy that are evident in many post-communist countries, stem from the fact that they were handed freedom and independence without that urge.

But on the other hand many young newcomers feel that they do not have a chance inside the establishment. For example, you can't go into politics without joining a party and conforming to that old worn out system...

This old and worn out system has only existed for 20 years. The problem is that those who were big in their 20s are now 45 and still at the helm of power. If you happen to be 22 right now, then they will remain there for a long time. I can understand this. It is a problem rooted in sociology, demographics and Estonian history.

But when I was younger, I was always the youngest. I was 35 years old and head of the Estonian desk at Radio Free Europe, leading colleagues that were some 20 years older than me. One just needs to work harder! My psychology forces me to be better. You have to go to bed later and get up earlier in order to get done more. I see no reason why somebody relatively young can't be active and powerful in Estonian politics.

(Interjects: "This is actually Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane"... or I mean they stole it from him.")

It is very easy to get far in Estonia, if you just put your mind to it. If you come up with something original, it will surely garner media coverage and hit home. It actually doesn't differ much from Estonian music scene, where young and fierce men came and started doing something. The system back then was much more rigid – Kaljuste and Mustonen are a great example of what people managed to achieve in the stagnated Soviet system thanks to simply being talented and hard-working. They did their own thing regardless of the regime!

During the Soviet times it was very clear what people were opposing, but now it's more complicated.

To be honest, I haven't opposed anything since the fall of the Soviet Union. I just want to do things that appeal to me.

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