

# Blocbuster

Tallinn International Organ Festival has clocked up 20 years. Artistic director Andres Uibo relates its precarious history to *Maggie Hamilton*

It was June 1992, and Andres Uibo had a problem. Just one month later he would have to meet the expenses of the Tallinn International Organ Festival. But Estonia had gained independence from the Soviet Union the previous year and issued its own currency four weeks before the festival began. Each Estonian received just 200 crowns (£8.65 / US\$17.43). 'It was a crazy situation,' recalls Uibo. 'You had roubles but you couldn't do anything with them. Bank accounts were all reduced to a very small sum. How were we going to pay the bills?' Rescued from the situation by the Estonian Oil Company to the tune of 40,000 crowns (two or three million crowns by today's standards), the event went ahead and, Uibo grins, 'it was the festival's best year economically.'

Pulling a rabbit from the hat seems to be something of a trademark for Uibo. Sitting in his family home near Tallinn, surrounded by Estonia's plentiful forests, I learn the remarkable story of a festival whose existence owes much to grace intervening on the knife-edge of chance.

Uibo himself became an organist initially through expedience, grudgingly agreeing as a teenager to share with his father the playing for services in the local church so he could save up money for a bike; 'but by the time I'd saved enough money to buy the bike, I was more interested in the organ!' After five years' study at the Tallinn Conservatory (now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), in 1981 Uibo successfully applied for the post of organist at the newly re-opened Niguliste (St Nicholas Church), bombed during the second world war and restored by the Soviet authorities as a concert hall and museum.

Fast-forward six years. In 1987 Uibo had his sights on the Speyer Organ Competition in West Germany. This was the first time Soviet organists were allowed to enter a competition in the West. But they couldn't enter as individuals, only as representatives of the State, and to gain this distinction required winning one of the top three places in an earlier competition in Moldova. Even this was not enough, however. The Soviet Union

**Tallinn's winding alleys have survived centuries of occupation and now fill with visitors to the International Organ Festival every August**





Maggie Hamilton



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**Instruments of the Tallinn XXI International Organ Festival in 2007 (from left): the doors of Estonia Academy's organ were painted by renowned artist Jüri Arrak and depict St Christopher and Christ's Baptism in the River Jordan; the 4-manual Rieger-Kloss is the principal instrument of the festival; casework of the organ in Nissi Church, which survives temperatures of minus 5 degrees in winter; the console of the Cathedral organ, which has fourteen 16ft stops.**

took competitions as seriously as the Olympic Games, and before exposing their musicians to the scrutiny of the West insisted on the winners (Uibo, and two organists from Moscow and Vilnius) being vetted by a Soviet jury, who would decide whether or not they could go to Speyer. Uibo suggested the play-off be held at the Niguliste, with its brand new organ; and, seizing the moment, he also suggested that each jury member who was an organist should give a recital as well as the competition participants. Moscow's Ministry of Culture agreed, and so was born the Tallinn International Organ Festival. The six concerts were sold out a month in advance, and

a few days later the three competitors were on a plane to Frankfurt.

Uibo gained much from the experience: 'I made a lot of contacts and saw how they organised festivals. The next year I applied those ideas to the Tallinn festival.' Although the festival was mounted at that time by the Estonian Philharmonic, a State organisation, Uibo and his wife Anu remained at the heart of it. 'It was a very interesting time for us. In the Soviet time the Church was divided from the State and it was not possible for organists to play in churches. But things began to open up a bit in 1988 – students even waved the national flag, which 12

Organs of the Tallinn XXI International Organ Festival include:

**Tallinn, Niguliste Museum-Concert Hall (Rieger-Kloss, 1981)**

**4 manuals and pedal, 63 stops**

Uibo: 'This has been the main venue of the festival since it began. It has one of the best Rieger-Kloss organs in the world. You can play all kinds of organ music – Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic, and it's particularly suitable for contemporary organ music. It has electric action, which is very precise.

'The flutes are clear-toned, with a nice, "scrunchy" Krummhorn. The principals and reeds are very characterful. It's very good for French Romantic music, and works well on a big scale and an intimate scale.'

**Tallinn, St John's Church (specification on p.66) (Orgelbau in Ostfriesland GmbH & Co. KG, 2006)**

**2 manuals and pedal, 17 stops**

Haseborg: 'Built on classic North German principles, this instrument is in the style of the 17th century. It uses authentic North German building techniques – all the parts are of oak or leather, with no plastic or rubber. It is good for

music from Buxtehude to Mendelssohn. Tuning is a light Bach/Kellner tuning, not completely equal temperament. It's tuned to A=440Hz; but of special interest are two stops on the Brustwerk, the 8ft Gedackt and 8ft Krummhorn, that can be used at 415Hz instead, making it a semitone lower.'

**Tallinn, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (Orgelbau in Ostfriesland GmbH & Co. KG, 2001)**

**2 manuals and pedal, 24 stops**

Haseborg: 'This organ is in a North German Baroque style, in meantone. It has three big bellows in the upper chamber, which can be hand-pumped (the only ones in a European music academy), or blown by motor if no pumper is available. The hand pumping gives a milder, warmer tone, more personal and intimate.

'It is a very large organ for this size of room (100sq metres), which makes the tuning difficult. The diameters of the pipes are the same as Arp Schnitger's organ in Hamburg's Jacobikirche. I overcame the difficulty by using low pressure for the bellows – 55 millimetres.

'The doors are painted by famous Estonian artist Jüri Arrak, and represent St Christopher and John the Baptist.'

**Tallinn Cathedral**

**(F. Ladegast 1878, W. Sauer, Op.1171, 1913, Christian Scheffler 1998)**

**3 manuals and pedal, 73 stops**

Uibo: 'The motor is the original one from 1913, still working! Today you turn the key to get it started; but originally you had to grind a handle. It has pneumatic action.

'The case is original Ladegast, as are 15 of the stops; the other stops are from Sauer's rebuild. Unusually, there are a lot of 16ft stops. Nowadays nobody builds so many, because it's so expensive – you normally find maybe four – but here there are 14! The organ sound is like a big symphony orchestra, perfect for German Romantic music, especially for Reger.'

**Pärnu Concert Hall**

**(Orgelbau in Ostfriesland GmbH & Co. KG, 2007)**

**3 manuals and pedal, 50 stops**

Haseborg: 'This is a Romantic organ, particularly good for French Romantic music. Uibo had the idea for the en chamade Spanish trumpet pipes to move in and out, so the hall can also be used for opera without the pipes protruding.'





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months earlier would have landed them in Siberia for 20 years – and I became the first person in the Soviet Union to organise concerts in a church. The cathedral was packed; it seated about 700 people, but there were another 500 standing, because it was the first concert since the second world war to be organised by the State in a church. It was also the first festival with a participant from outside the Soviet Union, Seppo Murto from Finland.

The effects of *perestroika* continued to pervade the political climate, and in 1989 Uibo and Reet Remmel (head of music in the Ministry of Culture), attended by the Minister himself, were able to go to

the Lahti International Organ Festival. There he increased his network, arranging for organists performing in Finland to come on to Tallinn afterwards and give a recital there. He also established contact with organ builder Christian Scheffler, who was to become key in the restoration of many of Estonia's organs. The following year Uibo opened the boundaries of the festival by organising some of its recitals in the second city, Pärnu, and some of the village churches: 'We wanted to show foreign guests how rich Estonia is in organs.'

Crisis struck in 1991. Foreign states had started to recognise Estonia, and an embassy was opened.

**Festival founder and artistic director Andres Uibo, seen here playing the organ of the Niguliste. He established the Organ Foundation in 1997, which has already funded the renovation of 25 instruments.**

**Pärnu, St Elisabeth's Church  
(Kolbe & Dureys, Riga, 1928)**

**3 manuals & pedal, 52 stops**

Uibo: 'This is an interesting mixture from the early *Orgelbewegung* time. There are a lot of overtone stops, and the reeds were built in the Baroque style. Romantic and early 20th-century music sound best.'

**Nissi Church  
(Carl Tanton 1848, Eduard Paulson 1873,  
Christian Scheffler 1998)**

**2 manuals & pedal, 22 stops**

Ago Tint (organ curator): 'The original organ was built by Danish builder Tanton. The Hauptwerk is original; Paulson added the second manual and swell box (operated by a hand piston). It's a nice instrument, with a beautiful hand-worked case. The tracker action constantly needs regulating – it is very heavy and tough to play. It's normal for churches not to have any heating and they're ice-cold in winter – minus 5 degrees. As a result the pipes develop a white powder. But the organ was built for a cold room, and it's been here for over 100 years; the problems would really set in if you put in heating!'



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**Chamber organ, St John's, Tallinn**  
**Orgelbau in Ostfriesland GmbH & Co. KG (2006)**

<b>Hauptwerk</b>		<b>Brustwerk</b>		<b>Pedal</b>		
C, D–e'''		C, D–e'''		C, D–f'		Manuals coupler
Quintaden	16	Gedact	8	Subbass	16	Pedal couplers I & II
Principal	8	Hohlflöte	8	Principal	8	Transposer on Brustwerk from
Rohrflöth	8	Quinte	3	Flöte	8	440 to 415Hz for Gedact 8 and
Octava	4	Gemshorn	2	Trommet	8	Krummhorn 8
Superoctav	2	Terz	1 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>5</sub>	Posaune	16	<i>Tremulant</i>
Mixtur V	1 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Cimbel 3fach	1			
Trommet	8	Krummhorn	8			

But a putsch in Moscow led to tanks on the streets of Tallinn, and Uiibo remembers: 'It was really a critical situation, because in Moscow the newspapers had already compiled, and were ready to print, the names of people who would be deported to Siberia. It was similar to the situation here in the late 40s, when in one night 50,000 Estonians were rounded up and deported. Every family was affected by this, directly or indirectly. So there was a real fear of history repeating itself.' However, the legendary Singing Revolution, the Baltic States' movement of non-violent resistance, miraculously averted disaster, and Estonia was left free to shape its own future.

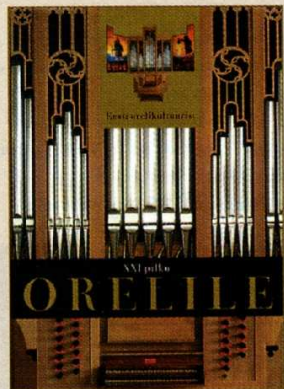
With the growth of the organ festival came increasing numbers of organists from the West. Uiibo explains, 'For me, it was very important to have eight to ten organists every year from different countries – not three or four from Germany, but one from Italy, one from England, one from Canada or America, and so on – so that we had people from different schools of organ playing.' Through these contacts Uiibo was in turn invited to other countries. Such was the regard that the festival generated that the principal headline on the front page of Estonia's main newspaper *Sõnumileht* on 21 July 1995 was 'The Organ Festival has begun', the smaller headline being 'The President of Ukraine arrives in Estonia'.

Estonian Radio has recorded all the concerts since the festival's inception and regularly exchanges the programmes with other countries' radio stations. Ninety per cent of the concerts are organ recitals, but there are also choral and orchestral concerts of works by composer-organists. A focus on Buxtehude this year included his complete organ works performed through daily recitals on the new chamber instrument in St John's Church, and masterclasses on the organ in the Estonian Academy, both by Martin ter Haseborg of Orgelbau in Ostfriesland GmbH & Co. KG, with whom Uiibo established contact in 1997 and who has built a number of new organs in the country.

The success of the festival has allowed Uiibo to begin realising another part of his vision: 'Until 1940 organ building in Estonia was of a very high standard. But under the Occupation the restoration and maintenance of organs was not important. Moreover, the instruments were in churches, and the Church and State were separate. An organ-building firm would be blacklisted if they worked in a church; and the Church had no money anyway, only the small sums members of the congregation were able to give. So organs fell into disrepair. On the plus side, in Europe during these decades a lot of Romantic instruments were destroyed, because the money was there to replace them; here that wasn't possible. So now we still have organs 60 or 70 years old, and organ builders visit us because they see Estonia as a sort of organ museum.' Uiibo's business acumen, commitment and consistency have gained the respect and trust of commercial companies and the State, who contribute significant funds to the Organ Foundation, a trust Uiibo established in 1997. So far some 25 instruments have been renovated, including those in Tallinn Cathedral and St Elisabeth's Church, Pärnu.

Uiibo thinks big, and outside the box. Within four years of liberation he had instigated a Faculty of Church Music at the Estonian Academy, with church organ as a specialism, something that would have been impossible in Soviet times. He was also the first to initiate the printing of Estonian music by publishers abroad. He would like to open up the organ festival to include an international competition. He says cheerfully, 'Money is never a problem – there's enough money in the world, it's waiting everywhere; you only have to find it and take it.' He proved that in 1992; and looking back on what he has achieved in the 20 years since he gave birth to the Tallinn International Organ Festival, it is easy to understand Victor Hugo's motto, 'There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.' ■

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*Andres Uiibo has published a book about the Tallinn International Organ Festival. XXI pilku Orelile (Eesti Oreliõprade Ühing, Tallinn 2007) traces the development of the festival, and gives organ specifications, short biographies of Estonian organ composers and a list of their works. 266pp, 100 b/w prints, hardback, in Estonian. Enquiries to [andres.uiibo@concert.ee](mailto:andres.uiibo@concert.ee).*