

Lithuanian Commemorative Coins


LIETUVOS BANKAS
EUROSISTEMA

Coin dedicated to *sutartinės*, Lithuanian multipart songs





Aukštaitija region
festival "Sutarjėla",
2012

SUTARTINĖS – LITHUANIAN POLYPHONIC SONGS

Lithuanian polyphonic songs – *sutartinės* – were inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010. The name of the songs originates from the Lithuanian verb *sutarti* – to be attuned or in harmony, and was chosen as the main form of various terms used in the north-eastern region of Lithuania known as Aukštaitija (the Highlands). These include *sutarytinės* (a dialectical form of the word *sutartinė*), *saugės* (derived from the verb *saugti* – to shout), *kapotinės* (from the verb *kapoti* – to chop), *paduotinės* (from the verb *paduoti* – to give or pass), *apskritos* (circulars), *sektinės* (from the verb *sekti* – to narrate or follow). All of the terms describe a certain quality of the *sutartinė*, e.g. *kapotinės* – the collision or "chopping up" of different melodies; *saugės* – prolonged, whooping chants. In folk vernacular, performance of *sutartinės* was called chanting rather than singing, and the *sutartinė* itself was referred to as a chant, thus distinguishing it from newer songs. According to Adolfas Sabaliauskas, the eminent early 20th-century scholar of *sutartinės*, the old chanters "will never call a song a chant, or a chant a song. That's how vast the difference between them is".

Chanting of *sutartinės* is closely related to musical instruments. Men in Biržai region would perform *sutartinės* on *skudučiai* (pan-pipes), *daudytės* (wooden trumpets), *lamzdeliai* (fife flutes) or small, four-to-six-stringed

kanklės (a type of zither). The chanters sought to imitate instrumental music: "They were sung as if they were played"; "It was very beautiful, like playing the *skudučiai*" and so on. Refrain vocables, such as *tītity*, *tūto*, *tūtava*, that are heard in *sutartinės* replicate the sounds of woodwinds. Instruments such as brass, gold or wooden trumpets are sometimes mentioned in the lyrics of the polyphonic songs. This relatedness to polyphonic music is reflected by the vernacular term *tūtavimas* (to toot, play *skudučiai* or wooden trumpets) used to describe the chanting of *sutartinės*. Those in Kupiškis region used to say that *sutartinės* are chanted or tooted, while those from Vabalninkas region would say "let's



Pan-pipers of Jasiškiai village.



Horn players of Savučiai village

go to toot" to invite someone to dance. Chanting was often linked to pan-pipe performance: "*sutartinės* must sound *skudučiai*-like". There is also a connection to bird-songs – people would say that chanters "are tooting like swans". Some *skudučiai* were dubbed as birds: *untutis* or *untytė* (male and female ducks), *tututis* (hoopoe) or *ūkas* (bittern).

Sutartinės are akin to purely instrumental polyphonic music performed by three to six pan-pipers or horn (wooden trumpet) players. The music is based on various rhythmic patterns that are learnt through certain rhythmic syllables (e.g. *tiū-ti-ti-tiūt*; *ut-ut un-ti-ti*) – an archaic form of oral notation. Instrumental music and the chanted *sutartinės* have common characteristics, such as harsh sonority, constant repetition of the same rhythmic motifs, and a cyclical form.

Most *sutartinės* used to be chanted while dancing. The dance patterns were not complex – pairs walking

"Trys keturišė" – the Lithuanian group performing *sutartinės*, 2006



face to face or in a circle, locked-elbow spinning, or forming hands-across stars. Such moves were reserved, often stately, while faster tempo *sutartinės* used to be accompanied by stomping or a distinctive hobbling that might once have been an imitation of duck waddling.

Since chanting requires extraordinary accord and interweaving of dissimilar melodies, *sutartinės* are usually performed in small groups. Depending on the number of singers and the type of polyphony, *sutartinės* are categorised into *dvejinės* (two-part), *trejinės* (three-part) and *keturinės* (four-part) chants. Three-part *sutartinės* are the least difficult to perform: two female chanters follow the first one, thus creating a canonical duplication of her melody. In four-part ones, the second pair responds by repeating the line sung by the first two chanters. Each pair consists of a "collector", who performs the main part of the text, and an "accompanist", who repeats the refrain. Two-part *sutartinės*, where two chanters sing the same text to different melodies, are the most complex. They require meticulous conformity and responsiveness between the performers. The singers stand "mouth to mouth" – a practice that is very important in *sutartinė* chanting, which was already mentioned by Maciej Strykowski in his 16th century "Chronicle". Zenonas Slaviūnas noted the same practice in the first half of the 20th century, while recording *sutartinės* performed by

Participants of the
"Skamba skamba
kankliai" festival,
2011



Folk dance
performed by
sutartinės chanters
of Smilgiai village,
1936

groups of chanters on the phonograph. Nearly 40 different performance methods exist in various parts of Lithuania. In some regions, groups of performers were larger in number, depending on the function of *sutartinės* – whether they were sung for dancing, rye safekeeping rituals or other purposes. The chanters were mostly women, although occasionally men participated in communal dance events too. In recent years, along with traditional performance practices, we can also see larger groups of ten to thirty performers.

The nature of *sutartinės* relates to various prominent rituals intended for safeguarding family and community wellbeing, or for successful hunting, fishing and harvesting. There are specific *sutartinės* for hunting, fishing, bee-keeping, rye and oat harvesting, flax pulling as well as calendar festivals (e.g. Shrove Tuesday, Easter, Whitsun), weddings and other family occasions. Some *sutartinės* rather metaphorically describe wartime events, mentioning crusaders or the land of the Turks. Of note is a set known as *Sudaitis sutartinės*. The first version of its texts comes from Strykowski's "Chronicle" (1582), while the latest one was documented in the 20th century. It is thought to be an account of an actual event – the fiery destruction of Kaunas castle in 1362.



Performance of a three-part *sutartinė* at the "Sutarjėla" festival, 2012

At the beginning of the 20th century, it was still said that *sutartinės* "come from fairies or sprites [..]. Girls who liked chanting remained unmarried for a long time, since suitors feared that their wives would turn out to be witches". Deeming *sutartinė* chanters fairies or witches, i.e. mythological beings, defines the exclusive status of the performers. Furthermore, at the end of the 20th century, several legends were recorded about sprites singing *sutartinės* in Molėtai region. One of them describes three fairies living a few kilometres apart and singing a Lithuanian polyphonic song. Legends about fairies lead us to surmise not only about the uniqueness of the chanters but also the chants themselves, reflected by their links to the mythical world of fairies.

Sutartinės represent a long-standing polyphonic music tradition that is evidenced by a harsh sonority of seconds between voices. In *sutartinės*, seconds are considered to be consonant (harmonious) intervals rather than dissonant as they are presented in Western music theory. The chanters seek to "clash" their voices to produce a sound that is as harsh as possible. The old chanters used to view this type of performance as "a thing of great beauty" and compared it to the tooting of swans, croaking of cranes or clanging of bells. At the beginning of the 20th century, the locals in rural areas started comparing it to the cackling of hens, mocking both the chants and their performers. This gave rise to parodies of *sutartinės*, the so-called "hen conversations", e.g. "this is yours, this is mine,

put 'em together, it will belong to both of us" (lads used to sing such songs to make fun of girls chanting *sutartinės*). This shows the changed musical taste – sounds that were once liked turned out to be unusual and laughable.

Another important feature of *sutartinės* is their open form that creates the impression of a never-ending, uninterrupted chant. Chanters would often stand in a circle: "one starts, the next one catches up, the third takes it from the second one, and then it goes round and round, involving all the chanters". Thus it is not by chance that in folk vernacular *sutartinės* were sometimes referred to as "circulars". Due to the narrow range of their melodies, the motley fabric of the music is woven out of just a few sounds and repetitive inflections. Controlled emotion while remaining in the same state of mind are characteristic traits of *sutartinės*. Communal participation is very important as well, as attested by the very term of *sutartinės*: to agree, to come into harmony with one another. When chanting or pan-piping a *sutartinė* and striving for concord of sounds, an individual participant is not that important. The *sutartinė* is born only when all chanters and musicians are in accord.

Sutartinės were first written down at the end of the 19th century, when this group-chanting tradition started fading away. There is no known written documentation of their existence up until the 16th century (*sutartinės* were first mentioned in Strykowski's "Chronicle"), thus pinpointing the precise date of their origin is not that simple. Nevertheless, their roots are believed to stem from as early as the Stone Age, since many traits point to their archaic origin: polyphony in seconds, polyrhythms, polytonality, a profusion of vocables (e.g. *čiūto, tatarō, sadūto tūto*), a non-strophic structure and reflections of old occupations, such as hunting and bee-keeping, bird-sound imitations.

By the middle of the 20th century, the *sutartinė* tradition was on the brink of extinction, yet luckily it was only its temporary "wilting". The revival of *sutartinės* began at Povilas Mataitis's concert "Lithuanian Folklore Theatre" held in Vilnius in 1968, when *sutartinės* were reborn for a new and qualitatively different life, which in various forms lasts to this day. Having realised their complexity, small groups chanting *sutartinės* started popping up (such as "Trys keturiose", "Sasutalas", "Kadujo", "Gaudė" and "Ūtara"). Today, *sutartinės* can be heard at international folklore and neo-folk festivals, the Aukštaitija region festival "Sutarjėla" and on many other occasions.

At the beginning of the 20th century, *sutartinės* were started to be viewed as a symbol of Lithuanian national identity. They were believed to become a "wellspring of sound-sources for Lithuanian composers' works, touching the Lithuanian spirit and maintaining the undying Lithuanian character" (Adolfas Sabaliauskas). And this is exactly what finally happened – in the 21st century, *sutartinės* became one of the most important cultural symbols, conveying Lithuanian identity and unifying the nation.



Coin dedicated to *sutartinės*, Lithuanian multipart songs (inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity)

Denomination: €2	On the edge of the coin: LAISVĖ * VIENYBĖ * GEROVĖ (FREEDOM * UNITY * WELL-BEING)	
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Diameter: 25,75 mm	Weight: 8,50 g	
Mintage: 500,000 pcs, of which 5,000 coins are BU quality in a numismatic package		Common side designed by Luc Luycx
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LIETUVOS MONETŲ KALYKLA

Coins minted at

the Lithuanian Mint

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Coins photographed by Arūnas Baltėnas

Designed by Liudas Parulskis

Photo credits: Aliona Rockina, Andrius Morkūnas,

Petras Ločeris, Jurgita Treinytė, Balys Buračas

(VDKM 3880), Keiichi Kagi, personal archive of Stasys Paliulis

Printed by INDIGO print

www.indigoprint.lt

Published by the Bank of Lithuania

Gedimino pr. 6, LT-01103 Vilnius