



CHORAL TOURS OF LATVIA AND ESTONIA

May 19-25 AND MAY 26-28, 2025

Aira Birziņa has been discussing our tour with Latvian and Estonian choral conductors and colleagues in Riga at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music and the Riga Cathedral Choir School. **As of January 2, we are planning on the following events:**

- Rehearsals for the Riga Cathedral Boys' Choir (Mārtiņš Klišāns), the Mixed Choir of the Riga Cathedral Choir School (Jurgis Cābulis), Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA (Aira Birziņa), Youth Choir BALSIS (Ints Teterovskis), professional chamber choir AVE SOL (Andris Veismanis), Youth Choir KAMĒR (Jurgis Cābulis), University of Latvia's JUVENTUS (Valdis Tomsons). **You will find videos for all of these internationally award-winning choirs on YouTube!**
- Conducting and composition exams at the Academy of Music
- Meeting with composers at the [Latvian Composers Union](#) and with Board Chair, composer Kristis Auznieks
- Meeting with music publisher [Musica Baltica](#) representatives at their store with the opportunity to purchase Baltic choral music!
- Tours of the open-air stage in [Mežaparks and the Song and Dance Celebration Exhibition](#)
- A day trip to the Limbaži region of Latvia (north of Riga) for an open-air concert featuring several hundred singers from the region in traditional costumes. We are planning several stops along the way to see the beautiful countryside and historic attractions.
- Notable guest speakers who will discuss topics such as what makes the unique Baltic choral sound and the phenomenon of choral culture as part of the national identity in Latvia; Aira is in discussions with several conductors and composers about this, and there is great interest in presenting to you.

Lectures and Reading Sessions

The response from both Canadian and US conductors to presenting a lecture at the Academy of Music was overwhelmingly positive, and as we will likely only have two one-hour time slots for lectures, we are considering adding reading sessions of Canadian and American choral music, specific to children's, youth and adult choirs.

If you would be interested in presenting a reading session for one of these choral groups, please let me know! I will be sending more information about the academic lecture submission process and reading sessions in the next couple of weeks.

Additional Activities – not included in registration fee

The [Latvian National Opera](#) will be presenting [Handel's *Flavio*](#) during the week we are there, and we are keeping the evening of Friday, May 23 open for those who wish to attend. There are still a fair number of tickets available, but they sell out quickly. We recommend you purchase tickets as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

There are several cultural attractions which are highly recommended visits right in the heart of Riga:

- [The Latvian National Museum of History](#) in the Riga Castle
- [The Latvian National Museum of Art](#)
- [The National Library of Latvia](#) – an architectural wonder with some very special cultural exhibits
- The Museum Riga Art Nouveau Centre and the walking tour of the highest concentration of [Art Nouveau](#) architecture in the world.
- Shops and open-air markets which sell unique Latvian folk costumes, woven textiles, knitting, woodworking, ceramics and other handicrafts.

Estonia Tour

Almost all interested participants would like to also visit Estonia from **Monday, May 26 – Wednesday, May 28**, so Aira and I are in discussions with her colleagues there.

Estonian choirs also have an open-air stage and are currently preparing for their big Song Celebration, which will take place this summer in Tallinn.

We would most certainly visit the [Arvo Pärt Centre](#) outside of Tallinn and are exploring other opportunities. Arvo Pärt is celebrating his 90th birthday this year, so we are also hoping to find some events around this. We are confident that we will soon have a tour to Estonia as well!

Hotel Accommodations

Our group will be staying at the [Radisson Blu Elizabete Hotel](#) in the heart of Riga, very close to the [Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music](#), where we will be visiting often. It is also close to the [Old Town](#), the [Freedom Monument](#), the Latvian National Opera, many shops and restaurants. Riga is a very walkable city, and we will be walking a lot!

In Tallinn, we plan to stay at the [Metropol SPA Hotel](#) in the heart of Tallinn, also a very walkable city.

Both hotels include a hearty buffet breakfast with many options for everyone.

Accessibility

For the most part, Riga and Tallinn are very accessible cities, with elevators in most buildings we will be visiting. There may be some buildings which will only have stairs and some streets, especially in the Old Town, are still cobblestone, so you will want to pack comfortable, stable shoes!

Current Political Situation

As you are all aware, Russia has been at war in Ukraine since February 2022. Latvia has given 46,500 Ukrainians temporary protection status, which is significant, given the population of Latvia is less than 2 million. The Ukrainian people in Latvia are attending Latvian schools, learning the language, working where they are able and singing in Latvian choirs. Many choral conductors say that singing in choirs gives Ukrainians a sense of community and it is where they feel most at home. They also do not want to be known as refugees, as their view is that they have temporarily left Ukraine because of the war.

Since the war started in Ukraine, NATO has fortified its presence in the Baltic States, with more than 20 allied countries at any given time in the Baltics, including 13 national contingents in Latvia coordinated by the Canadians. The Baltic States are investing heavily in NATO, at the expense of their cultural and other budgets. Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2024, fortifying the region even more.

I have contacted the Latvian Embassy in Canada, the Canadian Embassy in Latvia, and a colleague who is the Honorary Consul to Latvia in Quebec, and who is currently in Latvia, where he lives several months of the year.

All have assured me there is no need for concern in the Baltic region, nor do they foresee anything changing in the near or distant future. There is certainly a military presence, but this is regarded as a demonstration of might and readiness in solidarity with NATO allies. As one colleague told me, the Latvian (and Estonian) people live with the knowledge that they always have an enemy at the eastern border, but they have lived with this since Latvia regained independence in 1991.

And this is also part of the ongoing story of choral singing in the Baltic States. The Baltic people sang their way to freedom in the early 1990s through the “Singing Revolution” and in Latvia, they have produced their famous Song Celebrations every five years since 1873, interrupted for only a few years by the Second World War. Choral singing is part of the national identity.

Rest assured, if anything changes in the coming months, I will notify you immediately, but we have no reason for concern at this time, and I feel comfortable that I have received the most reliable and knowledgeable information from the most official sources.

If you have concerns and would like to discuss this with me further, please contact me.

Letter of Invitation / Participation

If you require a letter of invitation or confirmation of participation in this tour for funding applications, please send me an outline of what you require in the letter and I will provide it for you as soon as possible.

Participation Confirmation

We would like to confirm our numbers for the tour as soon as possible. We need a minimum of 10 and will accept a maximum of 20 participants for this tour. [Please register by clicking on this link.](#) Payment may be made according to the schedule below after registration.

We will notify participants as soon as we have reached the minimum number so everyone may book their flights.

Participation Fees

Latvia Tour May 19-25, 2025	Includes May 18-25 (8 nights) hotel with buffet breakfast and tour fee for	1,650 EURO
Estonia Tour May 26-28, 2025	Includes May 26-28 (3 nights) hotel with buffet breakfast and tour fee	850 EURO
*Please note, fees do not include additional nights in hotels, flights or additional meals and tourist attractions not included in the itinerary		

Registration and Payment Schedule

Written confirmation of participation in either or both tours	on or before Wednesday, January 15, 2025
*We will notify everyone if we have enough participants to proceed as soon as we have reached our minimum requirement, or by January 16 at the latest	
50% deposit due	Friday, January 31, 2025
Balance due	Friday, March 14, 2025
*Cancellation before Monday, March 31 will receive full refund on hotel and 50% of tour fee; cancellation from Tuesday, April 1 onward will be 100% non-refundable.	

Registering and Booking Flights

Ingrid Kravis of Kravis Travel Inc will be processing registration payments and would be happy to also book your flights for you. Ingrid is a TICO licensed travel agent (#4000451) and has specialized in tours and flights to the Baltic region for over 25 years. She may be reached at 289-725-4812 or iktravel@on.aibn.com

For those who are interested in both tours, we believe it makes the most sense to fly into Riga and fly out of Tallinn, in which case it may work best to fly through Helsinki, but there are many routes to the Baltic region in May. Ingrid will help you find the best solution!