

# Introduction

Every May, 200 million people turn on their TVs or log on to the internet, not just to watch but to be part of the Eurovision Song Contest, an extravaganza of song, dance, stagecraft and politics.

Politics?

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), who run the contest, insist it is non-political. They ban songs like Georgia's 2009 'We Don't Wanna Put In' ('put in' was sung 'poot-in' to make sure everyone got the point) to enforce this.

They are, I feel, right to do so: the pretence must be kept up. But the Eurovision Song Contest is political to its thigh-high, spangly boots. It is now and, as I plan to show in this book, it always has been.

There's politics in the songs. Not allowed through the front door, it sneaks in through the back. The winner of the 2016 contest, '1944', was a passionate denunciation of Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars – and by extension, an equally passionate denunciation of Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014. In other years, we've had anti-colonialism, radical Socialism, Thatcherism, a marching song from Ukraine's *Euromaidan* movement . . . In the 1970s, a Eurovision\* song even started a revolution.

There's politics in the voting, with blocs of nations supporting each other's songs. It drove Sir Terry Wogan to distraction, but most Eurovision fans love that moment when the Cypriot announcer says with a straight face, 'And our twelve points go to . . .' It's all part of the ritual. It also tells us something important about Europe.

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\* Yes, I know 'Eurovision' is technically not the correct name for the song contest. Eurovision is the TV arm of the EBU, who produce both the contest and a number of other programmes. But 200 million viewers call the show 'Eurovision'. Who am I to argue with them?

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Behind this is the politics of belonging, not just to your bloc but to Europe as well. Eurovision asks, and always has asked, what it means to be 'European'. Estonia had no doubt in 2001, when it won the contest: it meant liberty. 'We freed ourselves from the Soviet empire through song,' said prime minister Mart Laar. 'Now we will sing our way into Europe!' Sixteen years on, ever more doubts are being expressed about our shared European identity. What will we find Eurovision telling us about that?

As well as providing insight into big national and international politics, the contest has also been a mirror for the subtler politics of gender, race and sexual orientation.

The contest has always reflected the changing role of Europe's women. As good a measure of this as any is the simple volume of female voices, from Corry Brokken quietly wishing her 1957 husband would put down his newspaper, to Céline Dion belting out 'Ne Partez Pas Sans Moi' in 1988.

The contest had to wait till 1964 for its first non-white entrant, the Netherlands' Anneke Grönloh, and till 2001 for the first black winner, Dave Benton. What does that tell us about Europe?

Eurovision is particularly loved in the gay community. Conchita Wurst's 2014 victory was applauded around most of Europe, not just as a good song well sung, but as a triumph for openness and personal authenticity. The contest's first openly gay contestant only appeared in 1997 – but go back to 1961, whose winner is often read as a song about a kind of love still forbidden at the time in many European countries. The contest means liberty here, too.

Eurovision has even had politics in its sets. In 1969, General Franco smuggled a Fascist emblem onto the stage. Moscow's lavish staging in 2009, which used 30 per cent of the LED screens in existence at the time, was a clear statement of intent – we want to be European!

Eurovision's very conception was political. It was the brainchild of Marcel Bezençon, a Swiss broadcaster who was a close friend of Jean

# The 1950s

# 1955

Watch those recordings of early Eurovision Song Contests – they’re almost all on YouTube – and you are back in a black-and-white world.

If you were watching at the time, your black-and-white TV would probably have had a screen not massively bigger than a modern tablet. You would have needed to turn it on a few minutes before, to let it warm up (at the end of this process, a little dot would appear in the middle of the screen, then expand to fill it with the new magic of broadcast images). You would have been lucky to have a TV at all. They cost more than a month’s average wage. Despite this, your state-of-the-art consumer goodie might still lurk in a dark wooden exterior. Apart from a few spindly-legged modernist sets, televisions were expected to merge decorously with the other furniture in the living room.

That world was black and white in a subtler sense, too. Distinctions were clear: good guys and bad guys, men and women, adults and children, class, nationality. Not everyone accepted these, of course, but most people did.

In urban Europe, much work was repetitive – grey, perhaps, rather than black and white. It was like this in the home for most married women (or maybe via dull jobs in typing pools or shops) and on the factory floor or in stiff, hierarchical offices for men. In the country, there was the hard toil of tending the small family farm. People often worked Saturday mornings. For many, Sunday in Western Europe meant putting on formal clothes for church (attendance, which had been falling in the inter-war years, rose in the decade after 1945).

Duty mattered. Personal authenticity, truth to oneself, did not – though integrity was valued: honesty, reliability, truthfulness to a role. Many young European men were expected to learn this via National Service in their country’s armed forces – despite the role of

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nationalism in the 1939–45 cataclysm, most people at that time were strongly patriotic.

Only the more raffish of Europe's youngsters would have sex before marrying. In many countries, they would have had little preparation: much sex education at the time was purely anatomical, often as much about flowers and rabbits as the slightly embarrassing fact that humans did this stuff too. If the woman got pregnant, she would face stigma and pressure to give up her child for adoption. The man could often just walk away. Or there might be a quick marriage, to ensure things stayed respectable. If, instead, the lovemaking had been with someone of the same sex, the participants would have been breaking the law in most European countries.

Some consumer goods were beginning to add colour to life in Western Europe. But in 1955 few families had fridges, washing machines, cars or TVs. Few enjoyed foreign holidays, or had any experience of a country other than their own, except for men who had seen 'abroad' as a battlefield. In the East, behind a vast barbed wire fence that split the continent in two, such luxuries were even rarer, despite the propaganda about happy workers and ever-booming production.

At its heart Europe, East and West, was still struggling with the legacy of war. Its cities were pockmarked with boarded-off bomb-sites. In its homes, photographs stood on mantelpieces showing sons, husbands, brothers, uncles or fathers who would never return from battlefields – or whole families who would never return from death camps. Men woke from troubled dreams of what they had seen or done. Europe's thinkers were wrestling with quite how this could have happened and what could be done to ensure it never happened again.

One answer was that of Marcel Bezençon and Jean Monnet: a united Europe.

It was not new. The vision – a Euro-vision, one could say – can be dated back to the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne. At the start of the seventeenth century, the Grand Design of France's King Henry

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of Navarre and his minister Sully had envisaged a 'High Christian Republic' encompassing all Catholic and Protestant Europe. With its six regional councils and one overarching one, this was a sophisticated intergovernmental system based on culturally linked sub-units which the modern EU could do well to revisit. Henry was assassinated before he could turn this vision into reality.

In the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo, author of *Les Misérables*, argued passionately for a united Europe. At the Paris Peace Conference of August 1849, he spoke of the day when 'bullets and bombs will be replaced by votes, [and by] . . . the venerable arbitration of a great sovereign senate, which will be to Europe what parliament is to England.'

After the First World War, the Pan-European Union was founded by Count Richard Nikolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi, to promote a single European state based on liberalism, Christianity and social responsibility. Eminent individuals such as Albert Einstein, Fridtjof Nansen and Sigmund Freud became members.

In September 1946, Winston Churchill made a speech in Zurich, where he advocated a 'sort of United States of Europe'. At the heart of his Euro-vision lay a co-operating France and Germany, but not Britain. In his model there would be four great powers: the United States of America, the Soviet Union, the British Commonwealth and Europe.

By 1949, full-on Euro-visions had become complicated by the lowering of the 'Iron Curtain', but the idea of a united *Western* Europe (maybe, just maybe, joined by the East at some time in the remote future) lived on. That year, the former French prime minister Robert Schuman spoke of a community of nations that would comprise those that possessed 'the European spirit'. He defined this as a consciousness of 'belonging to a cultural family and having a willingness to serve that [family] in the spirit of total mutuality, without any hidden motives of hegemony or the selfish exploitation of others.'

By 1949, there was action, too. The Council of Europe (a human rights organization, nothing to do with the modern EU) and NATO

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were set up in that year. The EBU first met in 1950, at a hotel in Torquay. Two years later, 1952 saw the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC): six nations – Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg – agreed to hand over national control of these sectors, both key to waging war, to a transnational ‘High Authority’. The authority’s first president was Jean Monnet.

Such was the Europe in which the Eurovision Song Contest was conceived. The actual date was 20 January 1955, when Marcel Bezençon suggested the idea to an EBU meeting in Monaco. Later that year, the EBU formally decided to go ahead with it the following May. The show would be called *Le Grand-Prix Eurovision de la Chanson Européenne*. It would be held in Lugano, Switzerland. If it was a success, they might even consider having another one.

What sort of music would it feature?

In 1955, there was a wide gulf between Europe’s ‘serious’ music, essentially the western classical tradition, and its popular music, which was all part of that post-war rush to untroubling conformity: the world of German *schlager*, Italian *musico leggera*, Dutch *levenslied* or Britain’s BBC Light Programme, of artistes like Freddy Quinn, Johnny Jordaan or Alma Cogan. In between these two sat jazz and a number of local musical traditions, such as the francophone *chanson*, where singers like Georges Brassens and Édith Piaf took on darker subjects: failed love, social alienation, existential disillusion.

However, a new music was beginning to make itself heard with ever-increasing insistency from across the Atlantic, on records imported to port cities like Liverpool, or broadcast by American Forces Radio or the freewheeling private Radio Luxembourg.

There was nothing in the EBU brief for the new contest to exclude rhythm and blues or rock ’n’ roll, but somehow this music found itself off limits. Why? It could have been that it was deemed not European enough, but my own suspicion is that it was simply about numbers. The *Grand-Prix* was aimed at a middle-class family

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audience because the EBU thought that would attract the most viewers. Given the profile of TV ownership at the time, they were probably right. Oma, Mama, Papa and the younger kids would all watch it; if their stropky seventeen-year-old wanted to sneak up to their room and listen to Alan Freed on their new transistor radio, well, let them. They'd soon grow out of it.

The contest has never quite got away from this early bias. That's part of its quirky charm. But it is also what makes it such a good mirror of its times – by not seeking always to present 'cutting edge' developments in music (often a minority interest), it allows itself to reflect wider social trends instead.



# 1956

**Date:** 24 May

**Venue:** Teatro Kursaal, Lugano, Switzerland

**Debuts:** Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland

**Winner:** Lys Assia, Switzerland

**Winning Song:** 'Refrain'

There are no video recordings of the first Eurovision Song Contest, except for the winner's reprise. I find this oddly apt.

1956 was a watershed year in the history of modern Europe. It was the year of the Suez crisis, when Europe's two biggest colonial powers, Britain and France, suddenly found out how little clout they had in the post-war global order. Their attempt to forcibly recapture the Suez Canal, newly nationalized by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, was halted in its tracks by condemnation from the new 'Third World', from Russia, and above all from the United States, which threatened to bankrupt Britain if it continued the adventure. So much for Churchill's 1946 vision of 'four great powers'. It was also the year that Russian tanks steamrolled into Hungary, killing over two thousand people and, with them, any hopes that with the death of Stalin the Iron Curtain would quietly rust away.

But both these events happened in the autumn of '56. The first, lost Eurovision had been held in the spring of that year. It comes to us from a simpler, vanished world.

We have no film of it, but we do have sound. The first ever Eurovision song was the feather-light 'De Vogels Van Holland' (the Birds Of Holland). 'Toodle-oodle-oo' go Holland's birds – more musically than any other nation's, of course. Nothing is quite as it seems in

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Eurovision, however. The singer, Jetty Paerl, came from a Jewish family that had had to flee Holland in 1940. Paerl's friends and more distant relatives had not been so fortunate: the Netherlands' Jewish population had been 140,000 in 1939; by 1947 it was just 14,000. Most of those missing 126,000 had perished in Auschwitz or Sobibor, just over ten years before the Lugano contest. (It's worth remembering that the Holocaust was closer in time to 24 May 1956 than 9/11 is to us today.)

The songs that followed (two from each nation, the only time such a format has been used in the contest) were either *chansons* – Belgium's Fud Leclerc felt like joining 'Messieurs Les Noyés Dans La Seine' (Gentlemen Drowned In The Seine) – or further light entertainment. Germany's nautical Freddy Quinn added a little swing. After they'd been sung, it was time to decide the winner. Eurovision wouldn't be Eurovision without controversial judging. There were more Swiss judges than those of any other nation, because Luxembourg had balked at the cost of sending judges to Lugano and, with touching faith in pan-Europeanism, had asked two Swiss to stand in for them.

Guess which nation won (reputedly by one vote).

'Refrain' was a pleasant, reflective ballad about lost love. No other places were announced, though it is rumoured that two *chansons* came second and third: second, the other German entry, 'Im Wartesaal Des Grossen Gluck' (In The Waiting Room For Good Luck) (it's a *chanson*: we've got a long wait), and third Fud Leclerc.

Half the fourteen songs sung at Lugano in 1956 were in French. Watching Eurovision now, we are used to songs in English (except from France) and results announced in English (except by France), but in 1956 French dominated.

Nobody was surprised. In 1956 it was France and Frenchmen like Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet (and French-speakers like Marcel Bezençon) who were driving European integration. French was the

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language of the new European institutions, including the original EBU brief for the *Grand-Prix Eurovision de la Chanson Européenne*.

More significant still is the list of Lugano participants. Apart from the Swiss hosts, the competitors are the six members of the 1952 European Coal and Steel Community. ECSC outsiders Britain, Austria and Denmark had applied to participate, but for various reasons did not end up on the Kursaal stage. (Britain had an entrant ready, zither-playing Australian singer Shirley Abicair, with a song called 'Little Ship', but she never made it to Lugano. It is not clear why, though it might have been because Britain suddenly decided it didn't want to be represented by a non-Brit. Australia in Eurovision? What an extraordinary idea!)

Six decades later, these six countries remain the ones where the European flame burns most brightly. If Europe becomes 'two-speed', it is the Europe of Lugano 1956 (minus Switzerland) that will be at its heart.

Looking back not decades but centuries, the list of Lugano competitors also maps with spooky neatness onto the Holy Roman Empire at its height, when Charlemagne was crowned its emperor on Christmas Day in 800 AD. Add Austria and Bohemia (the western half of the modern Czech Republic) and remove Southern Italy, and the Lugano list *is* 'Europe' as conceived 1,156 years earlier. Charlemagne's empire lasted, in name anyway, until 1806, though it kept changing shape over that time (it lost large chunks of what is now France pretty quickly and ended up as a kind of proto-Germany). But if the great emperor's ghost had been watching the contest on 24 May 1956, he would have felt totally at home with its geographical extent. This, he would have thought, is civilization.

Almost exactly a month after the contest, on 26 June, representatives of 'Lugano Europe' met in Brussels to discuss a report from former Belgian prime minister Paul-Henri Spaak, which proposed they form a Customs Union, a free trade area with common external tariffs (for

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a more detailed explanation of these terms, see Appendix A). This is arguably the moment that the European Economic Community (EEC), which later became the European Union (EU), was conceived. The EU and the Eurovision Song Contest may not quite be twins, but they are born from the same stock and have a very narrow age difference.