Foreword

For decades, the Amish have been one of America’s most prominent “exotic others.” Because they strictly keep to themselves and seek to maintain a distinct cultural identity, they have, by default, allowed others to define them. They have been unwilling to harness the commodification of their identity, giving non-Amish carte blanche to stereotype and exploit them: in the many Der Dutchman restaurants where hearty portions of starch, meat, and sugar are served; as the sellers of “made in China” Amish-style trinkets; on Amish tourist farms where buggy rides are offered; as well as in misunderstandings seen in the use of Dutch (rather than Deutsch) windmills, wooden shoes, and floral designs. This is partly the result of their own reticence to permit scholars access to their inner culture. This has been particularly true with regard to Amish singing, because much of it takes place in the context of worship, which is extremely private. That ethnomusicologist D. Rose Elder has been able to gain the trust of a major Amish community in Ohio and was allowed to document Amish singing in all its forms is a testament to her perseverance, sensitivity, and cultural knowledge.

Elder’s study exemplifies classic ethnomusicology, a field that developed rapidly after World War II, when “the study of music” began to include the entire world as international travel increased. Ethnomusicologists traveled to wherever the music was being made and, because it was mostly oral performance, they had to create their own documentation through photographs, film/video, audio recordings, and interviews. Taking their cues from anthropology, field researchers often became participant-observers. Mantle Hood promoted the idea of bi-musicality, where re-
searchers learned to perform the tradition they studied. Thus, ethnomusicology has long had a dual personality: studying music as an aspect of culture and studying music as a sonic phenomenon. Elder’s study of Amish singing speaks to both.

Over many years, Elder built the relationships and trust that were necessary for her fieldwork. Eventually, she was permitted to record a full range of song types, including those sung in church. Here she presents a comprehensive survey of Amish song types in context, describing the situations in which they were encountered and giving the singers a human side, even as they remain anonymous. She has transcribed the songs she recorded into staff notation so that readers can get an idea of how the Amish song world is constructed. Following the traditions of American folklore, she has classified the songs according to function and sentiment.

As ubiquitous as Amish culture is in several parts of the United States—especially northeast Ohio, central Ohio, eastern Pennsylvania, and central Indiana—few outsiders have ever heard Amish singing. Recordings other than those kept in well-guarded archives barely exist. There are no occasions where Amish singers present themselves to the public as other groups do, such as in folk festivals, international festivals, or special programs on NPR or PBS. For many other groups, church services are the natural sites to experience those cultures, because most church buildings are open to the public. This is not so with the Amish, since their congregations meet on a rotating basis in private homes instead of church buildings. They have schools, but these sit unmarked on country roads, and because they are private, outsiders may visit only by invitation. Elder was privileged to attend church services, enter schools, and visit private homes for her research.

The Amish have become idealized as old-fashioned, industrious craftsmen and farmers who remain close to the soil, eat whole foods, pollute but little, consume minimal amounts of energy, and take care of their families and communities. Some might see them as ideal Libertarians who depend on their community rather than the government. This stereotype is portrayed wherever merchants offer “Amish made” furniture, crafts, or even buildings. They are seen as the last bastions of old European hand craftsmanship. But when the Amish turn up among the general public, they sometimes exhibit perplexing traits. Young Amish men sometimes drive buggies through the countryside while blasting popular music from gigantic battery-powered amplifiers and speakers and occasionally behave as
wildly as any non-Amish teens. Amish communities have their own share of problems, but they try to address them as much as possible with their own resources. Like the rest of us, they are sometimes self-contradictory and belie their idealized stereotypes.

The Amish experience disease, sadness, disappointment, betrayal, death, joy, abundance, poverty, discomfort, and uncertainty like everyone else. Many of these emotions and experiences are expressed in their songs. These songs, however austere and reserved, provide rare windows into the Amish soul. Their songs articulate their beliefs and perspectives on the world and their hope for eternal life. Their melodies and words reinforce their core beliefs about how to behave, how a community is organized and functions, what to believe about their place in the universe, and how to relate to one another. It is through song that the Amish tell one another—and potentially the rest of the world—who they are and what they have experienced. Tours of “Amish villages,” buggy rides, and meals of meat, bread, and potatoes at a gigantic “Amish restaurant” show us little of the Amish soul or world view. Because the Amish write few confessional studies of themselves and rarely bare their souls to outsiders in novels, movies, or public lectures, their songs provide a wonderful opening into their world.

Elder’s work therefore helps us not only to see the Amish as human beings like ourselves but to see ourselves through the Amish. Ironically, even as we have idealized Amish life, few non-Amish desire to live as they do. But there is no doubt that they deserve our respect for maintaining a demanding alternative lifestyle and for preserving their dialect, their songs, and their sense of communal solidarity.

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