Quilts and buggies. Uniform dress and an emphasis on hard work. One-room schoolhouses and barn raisings. Pacifism and gendered division of labor. That’s what people generally know about the Amish. Curiosity about the Amish thrives, but most outsiders have scant awareness of the reality of Amish life and thought. What does it mean to be Amish? How do the Amish conduct their daily lives? What practices comprise their faith, and how do they maintain identities and values so different from the world around them?

From their early American home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to Middlefield or Holmes County, Ohio, to Nappanee, Indiana, and further west, north, and southward, the Amish phenomenon draws crowds. Legions of “English” (as the Amish call non-Amish people) arrive in Amish communities to sample “Amish” buggy rides, farm tours, cabinetry, home-cooked meals, quilts, and similar products.

Few tourists, however, get a chance to hear the Amish sing. Amish music remains largely an unexplored terrain in popular literature, and scholarly research has lagged. While musicologists, historians, and linguists have illuminated many facets of the hymnody of the Ausbund and the way it functions in Amish worship life (see appendix III), research on Amish music, infrequent in the past fifty years, continues to limit itself to the analysis, description, and notation of Amish church singing. This study attempts to address that lack of attention to the informal social and familial uses of music by looking at the many and diverse ways in which singing accompanies the activities of daily life in Amish communities.

Likewise, few studies consider the changes in Amish singing over the
past hundred years. In this book, I seek to remedy these deficits by comparing the recordings and transcriptions of musicologists and Amish writers from the 1930s to the 1960s to current practice among the Old Order and New Order Amish in Wayne and Holmes Counties, Ohio. I place the songs and styles in their historical contexts and explain the role and purpose of singing in nourishing and nurturing Amish children to be Amish.

Although it is difficult to prove cause and effect between singing and the vitality of this group, the Amish themselves agree that music holds a significant position in their lives. Singing helps to create Amish attitudes and an Amish worldview. As an approved activity, singing occurs in nearly every setting of Amish life and frames all their rituals, from worship, baptism, communion, courtship, and weddings to funerals. It enlivens, improves, and sanctifies both routine and special events: road trips by buggy or hired van, daily school opening exercises or holiday programs given for parents and grandparents, youth group gatherings for forging bonds of friendship, “single girl” sings or men’s sings for companionship and practicing the old hymn tunes. For many families, singing enriches daily routines of family prayer, rocking and soothing the perennial newborn, working in the garden, kitchen, barn, or other job site, and evenings relaxing on the porch. The corporate act of music-making stands at the center of Amish faith and life, urging me to document and discuss the singing of the Amish in all these social settings.

Also, music, like religion, can be a radicalizing force. Ancient songs that the Amish sing from their hymnal, the Ausbund, may at first sound stodgy and old-fashioned, especially to contemporary listeners accustomed to much faster, more rhythmic, and much shorter songs. However, many of the texts and melodies, written by martyrs in the sixteenth century, strengthened the ancestors of the Amish to give up everything—life, limb, status, and wealth—for their faith. Today, these same songs actively prepare Amish singers for resistance to the modern world, strange as that resistance may seem to outsiders. Amish hymnody serves to convict, convince, unite, and solace the believers as they struggle to learn and incorporate the words of faith that bring them closer to God.

We begin this study with an overview of Amish life and the role of singing in it, and then we move to a case study of a particular song, “Es sind zween Weg,” and explore what it demonstrates about Amish singing styles, musical diversity, and conceptions of boundaries. In Part II, we focus on Amish singing in childhood and adolescence, with visits to Amish
homes, schools, and youth sings. Part III investigates various aspects of Amish worship singing, and Part IV looks at songs for special occasions—weddings and funerals, miscellaneous events such as bus trips and holidays—as well as the future of Amish singing. All along the way, we focus particularly on Old Order and New Order Amish singing in Holmes and Wayne Counties, Ohio, with frequent references to more general Amish practices as well.

First, we start with a brief primer on Amish faith and practice. After examining the general contours of Amish life, we can narrow our lens to look specifically at Amish singing.
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