Why the Amish Sing

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Miming the cradling and patting of an imaginary baby against his shoulder, an Amish grandfather recalls singing and soothing first one twin son then the other. “How many hours a day do we sing?” he chuckles as he repeats my question. “It depends on how many babies you have to rock!”

Now a bishop, Jacob Beachy reminisces about the many hours of singing his favorite song, “Es sind zween Weg,” twenty-plus years ago to his own children. “And now we have four grandchildren next door,” he offers meaningfully.¹ His wife tells me about the grandbaby born with a disease that doctors predicted would shorten her life to a few months. “We took turns rocking her day and night, and she was never alone. We had only a little time to love her,” Erma recalls. “The doctors were surprised when she lived for eighteen months.” We look deep into each other’s eyes for a moment.

Later, Erma sings “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” for me and then hides a giggle behind her hand. She translates for me that Grandma is up to her knees in “mud,” adding that this is a probable reference not simply to mud but

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¹ For the sake of the story, the number of years is not specified.
to cow dung. We laugh, and I glimpse the young, carefree Amish girl still alive within this grandmother. She now sings for her grandchildren the same songs that, in all likelihood, her own grandparents sang to her.

As Erma’s spouse Jacob suggests, singing to and with young children is a centerpiece of Amish parenting and grandparenting. Fifty-four out of fifty-six Amish interviewees in one survey state that they sing “daily” or “often” with young children. Yet, singing is only one strategy among many that Amish parents use. Before we look at the particular songs of an Amish childhood, we should examine Amish parenting more generally.

Amish Parenting

Amish parents lovingly and vigilantly nurture their children in Amish principles and values. Ministers at the Amish Ministers’ Meeting of 1873 admonished parents, “Take very great care, you to whom the care of your children is so highly and preciously commended, that you bring them up from youth in the admonition of the Lord; for this is the greatest and most noble duty of the Christian.” ² The Amish take this charge seriously. With great consistency, Amish parents work to prepare their children for heaven. Amish parents, especially fathers, are seen as responsible for raising their children so that they will choose to be Amish. More specifically, they must account to God for how they turn out.³ Rosemary O’Day writes, “The Reformation, by reducing the authority of the priest in society, simultaneously elevated the authority of lay heads of households” to require an accountability for the religious and moral education and conduct of both their wives and children.⁴ Amish parents do not rely on any other institution, neither Amish private schools nor church fellowships, for their children’s religious instruction. They believe it is their own responsibility. At school, children learn arithmetic and reading, not religion. In worship gatherings, children worship alongside their parents, not in a separate Sunday school.

The Amish perform neither christenings nor dedications of their infants, mainly to stay away from any appearance of infant baptism. Historically, adult baptism is the primary tenet of the Anabaptist tradition; their radical refusal to baptize their infants in spite of the state-church requirement elicited severe, brutal penalties. The community does welcome the newborn, however. Neighbors visit on Sundays or weekday evenings
and bring treats for the mother. Men use the opportunity for fellowship. Friends assess whether additional help is needed and may send a teenage daughter to help with housework for a month or so. For twin births, the women of the district organize themselves to bring meals two times a week for two months, further evidence of a spirit of mutual aid.

Amish adults parent with kindness and firmness. They teach their children to fulfill their work responsibilities agreeably and without expecting thanks. Pleasure in accomplishing a task is seen as its own reward. “The dishes are clean and put away,” a parent calmly observes, rather than offering a reward or other affirmation.5

Amish children ask, “Why?” as English children do. One Amish man emphasizes, “Give them the real answer. If it’s important, tell them why.”6 When a mother writes to Family Life for advice about raising her “strong-willed child,” an answer from “a mother of eight” recommends that the child “needs to feel secure before discipline is effective. . . . The source of a child’s security is his parents and the more you hold them, cuddle them, nurse them as babies, and allow them to snuggle up to you night or day—the more secure they will feel.”7 Warmth, kindness, love, and attention open the child to accepting the authority and discipline of parents.

Adults appear reluctant to scold a child. “The scissors are sharp,” an aunt cautions four-year-old Eli as she gently removes them from his hands. But from two years old until the teen years, parents begin to impose “restrictions and exacting discipline,” according to John Hostetler, a scholar of Amish life, in order to teach the child to respect his elders and to recognize his “moral inadequacy” and the need to repent and commit to following Christ.8

Older children exert influence on younger children. Interdependence develops between siblings and cousins when young children accept help from those who are older and older children look out for the younger.9 Older siblings “persuade and wheedle [younger siblings] into obedience,” writes Hostetler.10 Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors all contribute to the socialization of a child. However, the parents are the first and foremost influences. Amish children imitate their parents’ example. Young children follow their fathers around the farm, patiently observing and helping as they are able. As the child grows, she is given specific chores, such as washing dishes, feeding chickens, or collecting eggs. One Amish woman remembers hanging song lyrics above the sink so her daughters
would appreciate what they have: “Thanks God for dirty dishes. / They have a tale to tell. / While other folks are going hungry, / We’re eating very well.” These daily influences have a predictable cumulative effect.

**From the Cradle**

As Jacob Beachy demonstrated, Amish infants are swaddled in their parents’ and grandparents’ singing from birth. But much more is at work in the image of Jacob rocking and singing to one of his grandchildren than simply a grandfather comforting a baby or soothing a tired child. “Early childhood music is not simply functional, that is, for entertainment or to quiet a child,” writes ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon. “It teaches the musical taste and orientation of a particular group. Lullabies not only lull but promise, praise and teach cultural values.”

Music teaches a worldview, awakening the singer and listener to an expanded self- and community-awareness as they participate in the musical process. “We feel before we understand,” notes ethnomusicologist and anthropologist John Blacking. “Affect motivates decision-making.” Singing helps the child feel the connection to and the protection of his parents emotionally before he comprehends these logically. How an Amish child feels about his family influences how he will feel about the community and helps him decide what it means to be Amish and whether he fits into, loves, and feels loyal to this group. The child learns the deeper structure of the community—the grounding principles, rules and expectations, values and norms—through song. First listening to and later singing these songs, the child internalizes the messages and, through each stage of life, sorts and sizes up the demands made upon her.

Historically, nursery songs stem from traditional dancing and singing games intended to ward off evil and invoke a healthy aura that promotes agricultural fecundity. Early examples are engaging, amusing, and highly symbolic. In one rhyming incantation, a woman sweeping finds a crooked sixpence, goes to town, and buys a pig. On the way home, the pig will not go over a stile, the ladder between fencerows. “And I shan’t get home tonight,” the woman complains. The cumulative, series chant seeks to break a spell placed on an object by sneaking up on it through complicated repetitions. Framed like “The House That Jack Built,” this Chaldean chant provides another example:
One only kid, one only kid, that father bought for two zuzims,
Then came the cat and ate the kid that father bought for two zuzims
Then came the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid that father bought for two zuzims.
Then came the staff that beat the dog . . .
Then came the fire that burned the staff . . .
Then came the water that quenched the fire . . .
Then came the ox that drank the water . . .
Then came the butcher who slew the ox . . .
Then came the angel of death that slew the butcher . . .
Then came the Holy One, blessed be He! And killed the angel of death.  

The cat eats the kid to set the process in motion. Jewish mystical (Haggadah) writers interpret the kid as the Hebrews; the father as Jehovah God; two zuzims, as Moses and Aaron; the dog, the Babylonians; the cat, the Assyrians; the staff, the Persians; the fire, Alexander the Great; the water, the Romans; the ox, the Saracens; the butcher, the Crusaders; and the angel of death, the Turks. The history of the Middle East is hidden in one child’s story-game. Each aspect of the rhyme has a counterpart; for in magic, “every power is subservient to a stronger power.”

“Rockabye Baby” intimates that the consequences for those who aspire to rise too high will be dangerous, perhaps lethal: “Down will come baby, cradle and all.” One version dating from 1670 cautions children that they are not too little to go to hell. Whether parents aim to frighten children into submission or whether children take pleasure in being frightened, the themes of violence and mortality are often explored in nursery rhyme and song.

The early Anabaptists inhabited a world of infant mortality, folklore, ethnic infighting, and the like. Although Amish parents choose not to tell fairy tales, their telling of the stories of their martyred ancestors are gruesome and chilling enough. Moreover, stories of the Hebrews and the apostles in the Bible contain both moral teachings along with stories of cruel violence and brutality. In addition to these stories, Amish children hear and read real-life accounts of a practical nature that entertain and educate. Songs for Amish children often tell stories even as they create a space for attachment between parent and child and transmit cultural and religious values.
Several nursery songs recur when Amish parents list songs that express the values they seek to impart to their children. These are “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof,” “Raddy, Raddy, Gally,” “Es sind zween Weg” (see chapter 3), the Loblied or Lobsang (see chapter 10), and “Bedenke Mensch, das Ende” (see chapters 1 and 13). The themes of each of these songs underscore the importance the Amish place on the extended family and on agriculture (whether a garden, animals, or crops), which remains an idealized Amish occupation. The repetition of songs becomes a powerful method of inculcating the idea of social harmony from an early age. Children daily hear soothing, gentle melodies and affirming, stirring words. “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” emphasizes the emotional well-being brought about by working together as a family while “Raddy, Raddy, Gally” evokes the sheer joy of parental love and the desire to hold children close, to have fun, and to socialize them into the Amish way. And “Es sind zween Weg” urges the Amish on their spiritual way.

The fact that Amish parents sing folksongs with messages about family life and love, like “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof,” might be surprising to some who expect that the Amish only seek to religiously indoctrinate their children. Understanding that Amish parents and grandparents enjoy their children and grandchildren and act warmly toward them humanizes the Amish. They are people who care for and love their children. Discovering the variety of family singing habits and the meaning behind them may moderate prejudices about the Amish as dour, emotionless people.

We now look at “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” and “Raddy, Raddy, Gally” in more detail before moving on to several other beloved children’s songs.

“Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof”

When interviewed about songs they sing to their babies, many Amish adults first name “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” (“Sleep, Baby, Sleep”). Or if I mention the title, women and men alike greet this most familiar song title with huge smiles and laughs of delight. They explain that Bubeli is a term of endearment for babies, whereas for older children it might be used in a teasing or exasperated tone: “Stop being a Bubeli (baby).”

Emily Gerstner-Hirzel documents many versions of this song in German language folksong, from “Ruh, Kindlein, ruh / der Wächter tutet: uh” to “Schloop Kinneke schloop / in Marias Schöötje” and “Schlaf Babele schlaf / und scheiss mer net aufs Wendele.” The earliest known version
from Bremen was published in 1767, well after the Amish had already departed for America. The most similar texts related to agriculture come from Basel, Lower Franconia (Germany), and Lancaster, Pennsylvania\textsuperscript{18} (table 4.1). The Swiss still sing this song, reports Wayne Weaver, a physician who grew up Amish and who visited Switzerland in the 1990s.

In  \textit{Singing Mennonite}, Doreen Klassen catalogues Mennonite songs brought to Canada from Russia. She documents five “Sleep, Baby, Sleep” versions. Comparing these to Amish versions, Klassen notes many variants in the lyrics of her five versions but relates that the “melodic differences were minimal.”\textsuperscript{19} It seems likely that this song, sung as early as 1767, went to Russia with Mennonite emigrants and to the American colonies with Mennonites and Amish people. Texts and tunes have changed somewhat, but they are essentially the same song with a similar message and simple folk-style melody.

Klassen translates one version, “Sleep, baby, sleep, your father herds the sheep / Your mother shakes a little tree / There falls down a little dream / Sleep, baby, sleep.” Another version takes on an edge: “Sleep, baby, sleep / Outside stand the sheep / A black one and a white one / And if the baby won’t sleep / Then the black one will come and bite it.”\textsuperscript{20}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Song title/lyric</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1767</td>
<td>“Slaap Kindken slaap / dien Vader is een Aap / dine Moder is een Etterlin / slaap du verwesseld Horenkind”</td>
<td>Bremen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>“Schlaf Büble schlaf”</td>
<td>Tirol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>“Schlof Chindli schlof / di Muetter hüetet d Schof”</td>
<td>Basel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>“Schlaf Kindlein schlaf / dein Vater hüt die Schaf / dei Mutter hüt die dürra Küh / kommt nich heim bis morgen früh.”</td>
<td>Lower Franconia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>“Schlof Bubbeli schlof / der Dawdy hüt die Schof / die Mommy hüt die rote Küh / un steht im Dreck bis an die Knie.”</td>
<td>Lancaster, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>“Schlof schlof schlof / der Tate wet fohren in Dorf / wet er brejngen an Epele / wet sain gesund die Kepele.”</td>
<td>Munich (Yiddish version)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Canadian version resembles the tune of a Pennsylvania version Ruth Hausman describes in *Sing and Dance with the Pennsylvania Dutch*, published in 1953. Although the Canadian version is in the key of F in 2/4 time and the Pennsylvania version, in the key of G, swings in 6/8 time (Musical Example 4.1), the rise and fall of the melody is the same.

Hausman reports that Amish settlers brought this song from Germany to Pennsylvania in the 1780s. Through the centuries, men and women have frequently moved between settlements to marry a spouse or to find affordable farmland or increased seclusion. Hence, no district can become musically isolated. One man of true pioneering spirit explains that when he married, he moved to Canada and then twice more, to Delaware and upstate New York, to inaugurate new communities. Amish interviewees acknowledge that, when newcomers join an established community, they generally match their singing style, pitch, and tempo to their adopted group’s singing. But undoubtedly, there is some measure of mutual sharing.

A young Amish woman working in a community business in Holmes County sings a local Ohio version for me. Barbara agrees to have her song recorded, which is unusual given that the Amish consider recordings, as well as photography, to be vain. Her melody differs from Hausman’s, and she adds a two-measure phrase (Musical Example 4.2). A comparison of the melodies in the Canada, Ohio, and Pennsylvania versions of “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” shows more similarity at the beginning of the first phrase than at the end (tables 4.2 and 4.3).

Source: Barbara. Interview by author, Walnut Creek, Ohio, 26 Jan. 1999.

Translated by an Amish interviewee.

Translation: Sleep, baby, sleep, Grandpa tends the sheep. Grandma brings in the skinny cows, / She wades in mud up to knees. She don’t come home until tomorrow morning. Sleep, baby, sleep. (Klassen’s version is sung at the speed of quarter note = 76 beats per minute in 2/4 meter. This is faster than the one Barbara sings at mostly dotted quarter note = 57. Barbara begins in 2/4 [at quarter = 70] and switches into 6/8 meter when she gets into full swing. Barbara uses a three-note, do-re-mi scale while Klassen employs a five-note, do-re-mi-fa-sol scale with an additional sol below do, strikingly different.

The Hausman version has the same scale pattern as the Klassen version. Klassen’s and Hausman’s are both written at a higher pitch than Barbara’s [a third and a triton, respectively]. [See appendix I, table A1.1].)

Table 4.2 Comparison of three melodies (Canada, Pennsylvania, and Ohio) transposed into C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Text and melody</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Sleep, little one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E DD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>E DED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>E DD</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Mother, the little Calves will tend, thru Mea-dows green their</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FF DD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>FFF DDD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>EE DD</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Way will wend, Sleep, little one, sleep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
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</table>
When Barbara writes the words for “Schlof,” she uses an alternative spelling, “Shlof.” This happens quite frequently, as Pennsylvania Dutch is a spoken, not a written, language and has no standardized spelling.

In “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof,” the agrarian theme of “Grandpa tends the sheep / Grandma brings in the skinny cows” emphasizes the security and regularity of mother, father, and grandparents tending the farm animals in the nearby corral. Everyone helps. All are productive and effective workers. Song texts like these, with their themes of rural life, love of the land, and faithful work, reveal sets of expectations that Amish parents hold for their children.

“Raddy, Raddy, Gally”

If “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” encourages cooperation and diligence, “Raddy, Raddy, Gally” signals the joy of being alive. Parents intone the sing-song chant “Raddy, Raddy, Gally” while bouncing a toddler on a knee. Ada Lendon laughs as she sings “Raddy.” Then she keeps on chuckling as she sounds out the words so that I can write down the lyrics (Musical Example 4.3).

Harvey Troyer offers a similar, rhythmic chant in an abbreviated version: “Ride-y, ride-y horsie / A mile’n’a half an hour. / Drive over a ditch / And dump off.” The rhythm, somewhat uneven despite the racing pace, follows speech patterns and resonates with the cadence of clopping horse hooves, a common sound in the Amish child’s life. The song is an unpitched chant, emphasizing rhythm rather than employing a melody.

In both versions, the singers choose an uncharacteristically quick speed,
giving the impression that thrilling the child is the song’s major purpose.\textsuperscript{21} While singing “Raddy, Raddy, Gally,” the adult jostles the child on his or her knee. In Ada Lendon’s version, the bridge breaks and the buggy overturns. In Harvey Troyer’s version, an inexpert driver and too much speed cause the accident. Evidently, some parents sing the third verse with the addition of “Down into a ditch!” and dump the child onto the ground.

In the traditional English song “This Is the Way the Farmers Ride,” the parent bounces the child a little higher and faster on each verse. My own non-Amish family sang this song and added a fourth verse, based on the radio and television show “The Lone Ranger”: “This is the way the cowboys ride, Hi ho, Silver, AWAY!” sings the adult, rearing the knees up like a bronco and ending with the child upside down (see appendix I, Musical Example A\textsubscript{1.4}). As each verse details the different riding paces of ladies, gentlemen, and farmers, “This Is the Way the Farmers Ride” echoes gender and class status distinctions. The parallel Amish rhyme, “Raddy,” just describes agricultural life, with an emphasis on working in the fields.

Other Children’s Songs

Amish parents I interviewed often had to think for a moment when asked about singing and parenting. Hesitatingly, they would answer by listing songs they sing often. They describe singing English nursery songs such as “Ten Little Indians” and “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” as well as Christian children’s songs such as “Fishers of Men” (see appendix I, Musical Example A\textsubscript{1.5}) and “Jesus Loves Me” (“Jesus liebt mich”) to their children in both German and English. Amish adults relate that they
also sing “fast” songs such as “At Calvary” and “Amazing Grace”—hymns they learned in school, at Sunday night singings, and various family and community gatherings.

Amish parents enjoy singing gospel songs translated into German, including “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Jesus Loves the Little Children” (“Jesus liebt de kleine Kinder”), “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” “He Leadeth Me,” and “I’m Building a Home.” In the late nineteenth century, the Amish began to collect hymns into songbooks such as the Unparteiische Liedersammlung. The Amish do not sing these particularly fast, but they are distinguished as “fast” relative to the slowly sung Ausbund songs. Like other traditional Amish music, these songs are usually sung monophonically—that is, as one melodic line without accompaniment. But, some groups may harmonize them in three or four parts.

Parents recall singing comical songs, too: “Oh Fritzly hole mit some Cider ruh” (“Bring Me Down Some Cider”), “Ald Butter Fas” (“Old Butter Churn”), and “Meine Mutter mit de shlop Cop on” (“My Mother with Her Farm Bonnet”). Considering what songs she sang to her children, one Amish mother replies, “Anything that taught them to be humble.” One Amish man tells me, “I’m seventy-eight and don’t sing as much as before. I used to sing while rocking children to sleep a half hour to an hour a day. I sang mostly church hymns.”

When asked about the importance of singing in her family of origin, one Amish woman explains, “Singing is good for the heart and it is a privilege to be able to sing. We loved to sit on the porch in the evening and sing as a family.” Another woman replies, “Singing transmits our values. It cheers up my kids and makes them ready to go to work.” “A lot of songs have a message in them like a sermon,” verifies another. The replies quickly become familiar as, one after another, Amish adults answer consistently.

Changes in Singing with Children

Yet, like other aspects of Amish life, songs of nurture sung in Amish homes are changing. Some Amish interviewees wonder aloud whether singing will retain its centrality to the worship and social life of their communities. Indeed, it appears that Amish parents are singing slightly less often with their children than their parents did with them. More than 53 percent of 56 Amish interviewees evaluate singing as of the same or greater
importance in their current family situation as it was during their childhoods, with 12.5 percent assessing singing as more important in their current family. And 46.4 percent express that singing was more important in the family in which they grew up. Will this change have an effect on the cohesiveness of the Amish family or the vitality of music among the Amish? Perhaps. But even children whose families do not greatly value or engage in singing have plenty of opportunities to participate in singing through church, youth singings, and school singing. Perhaps the locus of singing is moving out of the home as the community gathers to reinforce family teachings.

The Amish school has become one of the major venues in which Amish singing practices are transmitted, and it is the venue to which we now turn. Visiting numerous Amish schoolhouses, I discovered that each contained a unique musical atmosphere, depending on the personalities of the teachers, students, and parents. Each school I visited confirmed my suspicion that singing among the Amish—even among the youngest in their communities—remains a robust, lively, and daily expression of their culture and faith.