Why the Amish Sing

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Why the Amish Sing: Songs of Solidarity and Identity.

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Case Study: School Repertoire

In der stillen Einsamkeit  
Findest Du mein Lob bereit.  
Großer Gott, erhöre mich,  
Denn mein Herze suchet Dich.  
In silent solitude  
You will find me praising you.  
Great God, please listen to me  
Because my heart searches for you.

—Eine Unparteiische Liedersammlung (1892/1999)

The Vorsinger for the day announces the page number. “One hundred and seventy-six,” says Junior, a gawky fifth-grader with a mop of thick blondish hair. The children race to be the first to find the page in the Liedersammlung. Every school I visit owns this hymnbook with spiritual hymns and psalms first collected by Old Order Mennonites in Pennsylvania in 1804. The Liedersammlung includes hymns from the Ausbund and songs from other eighteenth-century collections. The smooth, black, hardback volumes seem well used, rubbed shiny, but are in unexpectedly good condition. The children have learned to take care of the classroom supplies.

I turn to the page and immediately recognize the song. Written by Joachim Neander in the 1600s, “In der stillen Einsamkeit” is a meditation hymn. God has ordered the universe, and humans respond with awe, praise, devotion, and thanks. I’ve heard this song in four other schools, but to date, each group has used a different melody. I’m eager to find out how this version sounds.

I glance around the school. The children sit in pairs on the desk benches, youngers with olders, modeling appropriate behavior and helping with finding songs in the books. The teacher is relaxed, sitting with her book open. Her fast-paced work will begin shortly. Through the window, I see
the requisite tetherball hanging from and bouncing in the breeze against its silver pole and the softball backstop a little farther away. All in good time, the school day will unfold with lessons, recess, children’s chatter, teacher’s questions, spelling tests, and handwriting assignments. But after Junior sings the single note of the first syllable, and the others join in on the second, the children dedicate their day to God (Musical Example 6.1).

Translation by another Amish interviewee.
Translation: (verse 2) You do not change.
Ever silent and still with your hand
You rule the seasons
And order them.
(verse 8) It doesn’t matter if outside it freezes,
My heart is warm as I think of you.
Praise and thanks are here,
My dear Lord, in solitude.

I think back to the versions of the song I’ve heard in other Amish schools. One group sings one verse and then intersperses a chorus of “You’ll Never Miss Your Mother ’Til She’s Gone” in an upbeat, spirited rendition without any sentimentality. Another class adds the phrase “at the cross” in English as a tag to each line (see appendix I, Musical Example A1.6). Another sings two verses of the hymn and then sings a canon with the hymn text “Father, We Adore Thee” as a chorus; the group continues to alternate two verses of “In der stillen” with one chorus of “Father, We Adore Thee.” The group stays fairly well on pitch until the final chorus, when the pitch unintentionally rises by a half-step.

Although the tunes and method of singing them vary across schools, “In der stillen Einsamkeit” remains a favorite among Amish schoolchildren.
This seventeenth-century song, which speaks of the order of creation and of human devotion in the face of God’s grandeur, is a good starting point for our survey of favorite songs among the young scholars in Amish schoolhouses in Ohio.

A List of Favorites

Amish children freely choose more religious than nonreligious songs to sing at the opening of their school day. Based on listening to singing sessions in more than twenty Amish schools, I formulated a list of their favorite songs (see appendix II, table A2.1). As even a cursory glance at the list makes apparent, funny and frivolous texts, such as “Der Hund” (about a dog that bays at the wrong tree) and the “Bronco Song” (about a bronco that throws all riders into the briars), are few and far between. Scholars tend to pick “In der stillen Einsamkeit,” “Es sind zween Weg,” “Wir singen dir, Immanuel”—with extra “Hallelujahs!”—and other songs from the Liedersammlung. They also select gospel and youth favorites such as “My Life Is a Canvas,” “I Was Made in His Likeness (and Born to Serve the Lord),” “I Know Who Hung the Stars,” “Boys and Girls for Jesus,” and an Amish favorite, sung at every nonworship Amish gathering, “Gott ist die Liebe.”

Writing about Amish schools, Sara Fisher and Rachel Stahl report that two mornings a week, Amish scholars sing German songs; three mornings, English songs. I found much more variety than their study seems to indicate. Some schools sing in English except for special favorites, such as “Gott ist die Liebe.” In one Old Order school, the teachers explain that they always sing in German; another school only sings in German on Fridays. In ten of the schools, scholars sing at least one German song each day that I visit. However, in all the schools I visited, the selection of English titles is more diverse and more plentiful, perhaps because students focus on learning English while in school. We will look at some of the German songs in Amish schoolhouse repertoires first and then some of the English ones.

German songs. When scholars in Amish schools sing in German, they sing a limited number of texts. As mentioned earlier, five of the school groups I visited sing “In der stillen Einsamkeit,” all sung to different tunes; three sing “Es sind zween Weg,” using two different tunes. When choos-
ing songs with which their classmates are less familiar, Vorsingers risk poor success in their attempts to pull the group along. More or less latitude in song choice depends on the school, but all of the schools I visited at least own copies of the Liedersammlung, which contains only song texts in German.

In one Old Order Amish school I visited, after the scholars stand to recite the Lord’s Prayer in German, an eighth-grade girl chooses and leads the first song, a hymn based on Matthew 4:17. She loudly and confidently declares: “Create Your Blessedness” (see appendix I, Musical Example A.1.7). In this school, the children only sing German songs. With no pause, another designated child announces the number of the next song and leads with timid voice, “O Vater! Kindlich beten wir.”

Singing songs in the German language connects Amish children to their history and tradition in a profound manner. Simply using the language of the martyrs of their faith gives unspoken but weighty credence to the past. Outsiders to the Amish tradition may find it fascinating that songs like “In der stillen Einsamkeit” and “Bedenke Mensch, Das Ende,” written over three centuries ago and sung in German, can elicit such an emotional resonance with contemporary Amish schoolchildren. Given the frequency with which children themselves choose these particular songs, however, it is evident that the songs of the past are alive and well among the youngest members of Amish communities.

**English songs.** The English songs sung in Amish schoolhouses are a combination of religious and nonreligious texts and tunes. Many are sung in a lively manner and may include motions. In one school, where English is the regular fare, two children choose songs: “The Wonder of Love” and “If You’re Happy and You Know It.” The children clap and stomp with real enthusiasm. Another child selects the action song “Peter, James, and John,” a Bible story song and an apparent class favorite. The children turn in my direction as they “cast their nets on the OTHER side of the boat.” Completely involved, their faces beam. One Vorsinger chooses a Bible story song about the Good Samaritan, “From Jerusalem to Jericho.”

In another school, the children use American Sign Language for two verses and two choruses of “Jesus Loves Me.” For the name “Jesus,” the children motion to each palm of their hands with the middle finger of the other, alluding to the nail piercings of the crucifixion. Engrossed, they obviously enjoy singing songs with actions. At this school, the children lead two songs, and the teacher leads one, “I learned about Jesus in Grandma’s
Rocking Chair,” a southern gospel song written by Joel Hemphill and recorded by his family in 1975. Like most groups, these children sing the choruses more confidently and enthusiastically than the verses of each song. One seven-year-old squeezes her lips between her fingers to feel her lips move as she sings. Another six- or seven-year old locks gazes with me, and when I finally look away, she slaps her forehead. I smile in amusement. The sound is full and rich. One boy sings an octave below the rest of the children, still on pitch with the others.

Next, they sing a gospel song at half tempo, sliding between the notes and anticipating the note of the next syllable of text. An immigrant from Ireland and a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, William Hunter, born in 1811, wrote the text to the second hymn, “I Feel Like Travelin’ On” (“My heavenly home is bright and fair, I feel like travelin’ on. / Nor pain, nor death can enter there, I feel like travelin’ on”). The tune is marked traditional, which means it probably has a Scotch-Irish origin. The scholars do not sing cohesively but are dragging each other along, working out the tempo between them, with no designated director. Sitting near me sprawled in his chair, one larger boy, off in his own little world, is not singing at all.

Their version of “This Land Is Your Land,” the old folk favorite, reverberates with their joy at being faithful stewards of God’s earth. Once again, the scholars add anticipations to the melody.

At one school, I am surprised to hear scholars sing a selection made famous by American pop singer–actress Doris Day in 1949, “There’s a Bluebird on Your Windowsill.” One teacher reports that they sing a Liedersammlung text to this tune. She tried several texts but could not remember the one whose lyrics fit.

Whether they are singing in German or English, young scholars in Amish schoolhouses learn the songs that shape their understandings of the world and that mold their behavior. Amish writer John Coblentz states, “We can learn to know what is in a [hu]man’s heart by listening to his song.”4 The Amish believe that what a child sings comes from her heart, but what she sings also forms her heart. “Too much listening is not healthy for that inner melody,”5 writes Coblentz.

In my visits to Amish schools, it becomes apparent that some Amish children enjoy singing and that others do not. The Amish expect that all will conform and carry their own weight just as they must “bear each other’s burdens.” They believe singing will be required in heaven, so singing
is seen as preparation for an Amish child’s final destination. Children must be allowed the opportunity, as one Amish woman writes, “to develop the feeling of expressing their devotion and reverence in their hearts to God.”

As Amish children become teenagers, their participation in youth sings will further mold that devotion and reverence. It is to these musical, religious, and social events for Amish adolescents that we now turn.