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Review of **Elder, D.R. 2014. *Why the Amish Sing*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Gracia Schlabach, *Lyndonville New Order Amish Community*

In recent decades many facets of Amish life have been explored in detail—except for their singing, and especially, singing in a variety of social settings. This deficiency is remedied by *Why the Amish Sing*. After many visits and personal interviews in the Holmes County, Ohio, area over a period of several years, Elder shares first-hand observations of Amish singing from an ethnomusicologist perspective.

In part one, “Amish Life and Song,” Elder steps inside a one-room schoolhouse one Friday mornings where a young boy named Roman enthusiastically selects the song, “Bedenke, Mensch, das Ende” (“Consider, Human, the End”). Although its message may seem morbid, she uses the song as a framework in which to place Amish singing within context of lifestyle and identity. These children follow the legacy of their Swiss Brethren ancestors as well as early settlers in central Ohio.

The chapter entitled “Functions of Amish Singing” is a masterpiece that shows how singing serves not only as a medium for worship and devotion, but also for enjoyment, communal memory, and cultural maintenance amid ongoing change. A case study of “Es Sind Zween Weg” (“There are Two Roads”) highlights the deliberate, daily choices which are part of living a separated life, a concept Elder calls boundary development.

Part two, “Singing in Childhood and Adolescence,” clearly demonstrates that Amish parents use song to transmit values and cultural identity to their children, whether their agrarian heritage via lullabies such as “Schlof, Bubeli, Schlof” (“Sleep, Baby, Sleep”) or their faith and belief through hymns, both German and English. A case study of school repertoire is youth hymn singing and Wednesday evening Bible study.

Part Three, “Singing for Worship,” covers subjects typically associated with Amish and their singing: church services, the centuries old *Ausbund* hymnal, and the familiar “Loblied” (“Song of Praise”). Elder brings in new dimensions by comparing recent transcriptions of Amish slow tunes and those made in the 1930s to the 1960s. Another not-so-common observation involves pulpit intonations.

Part four, “Singing for Special Occasions,” continues on a similar theme, that of weddings, funerals, and holidays. Singing for shut-ins and while traveling are also part of community. I doubt that Elder was actually present at the New Order wedding she describes in chapter eleven because the account veers from her earlier pattern of accurate observation and becomes a garble of chronology and practice from different areas. Things like singing the tune of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” right after the ceremony would not have taken place at this particular wedding.<sup>1</sup>

The final chapter, “Songs for the Future,” portrays twenty-first century Amish singing as a window of change. Among the younger generation, there is a renewed surge of interest for perpetuating the slow *Ausbund* tunes. At the same time, many are interested in learning to read musical notation and sing in four-part harmony. New texts and new melodies—some even by Amish writers—make their way into the existing repertoire, yet do not upset the balance.

The book comes in full circle to describe yet another one-room schoolhouse scene, this time in Pennsylvania. The students at Nickel Mines School sang “Bedenke, Mensch, das Ende” only hours before a gunman intruded on that fateful morning in October 2006. Selflessness and humility, reverence and trust in God—all these are part of the Amish singing experience. Singing is a part of the Amish survival process, a method of preservation, a means of resistance to worldly forces, and ultimately, a preparation for eternity.

Three appendices are “Additional Musical Examples,” “Research Methods,” and “Historical Studies on Amish Music.”

Elder builds upon historical studies but goes far beyond them to cover Amish singing in all its social contexts. Yet, as in earlier research done by outsiders, the missing link remains: the connection between Amish tunes and their sources not properly identified. To overlook this integral point leads to much unproductive hair-splitting between versions. Were variant tunes for “Es Sind Zween Weg” compared with their source, the early American hymn tune *Rockbridge*, their difference would simply reinforce the typical process of aural preservation. Therefore, Elder falls prey to an aspiration earlier researchers also often did: seeking a new discovery about the “Loblied” when there are only layers that require a patient persistent peeling back. Her significant breakthrough of an obsolete tune is but an adapted version of *Great Physician*. This tune is in common use as a “fast tune” among many communities.

A number of other technical gaffes preclude the book’s reliability as a definitive musicological reference. Songbooks are misidentified twice (60, 80) and one transcription is attributed to the wrong source (115). The German texts in the musical examples are rife with copy errors ranging from “*Gott is die Leibe, Ich liebe auch mich*” to using the Greek letter beta for the German *ess-zett*. To the casual reader, however, these issues are minor. In this much-needed book, Elder brings fresh, current insight and skillfully illuminates why the Amish sing.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Many of the individuals Elder met are personal acquaintances from my native Holmes County. Here the groom is a cousin to my sister-in-law, and the bride, her neighbor. The western New York community where my family now resides is mentioned on page 136 in “Singing the Journey.”