

SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

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Community as a discursive construct in contemporary Danish singing culture

www.soundeffects.dk



SoundEffects | vol. 9 | no. 1 | 2020

issn 1904-500X

Abstract

Community singing—the informal practice of collective singing at social occasions—has traditionally served various societal purposes. Recently, however, new types of community singing events have emerged in Denmark that make the singing act itself the central purpose for gathering rather than an appendage. Such events indicate that community singing is becoming more about participating in a performance and less about consolidating an ideological common ground. On the basis of an analysis of present public discourse, this article pursues the questions of how singing is perceived to construct community, and what kind of community can be formed when the importance of semantic song content fades. In conclusion, it is proposed that modern singing events, rather than merely reinforcing existing communities, now produce self-reliant, musically imagined communities.

Community singing is currently undergoing a revival in Denmark. Community singing (in Danish *fællessang*, literally “common-song”) is the tradition of informal collective singing traditionally accompanying an extant occasion such as a school morning assembly, a family party, a church service, a sports event or a public lecture. The practice is an especially crucial part of Danish culture that owes a lot to the folk high school movement starting in the 19th century and to the theologian and poet N.F.S. Grundtvig’s still influential thoughts on singing as a means of public enlightenment. Community singing has traditionally served the purpose of supporting the central objective, e.g. political or religious, of a given event. In general, singing has long been subject to the common assumption that its primary force of expression is verbal. This is true not least of community singing, which, as a genre, arose from the need to express matters that were to a large extent verbally defined, such as the solidifying of national unity. Recently, however, new types of singing events have emerged that differ from traditional settings by making the singing act itself the central purpose for gathering rather than an appendage. Consequently, in such events musical performance is privileged over verbal song content. I will term this new tendency the melocentric turn in contemporary singing culture, indicating a move from verbal to musical primacy. In other words, community singing is becoming more about participating in musical performance and less about consolidating an ideological common ground.

In this article, I will pursue the questions of how singing is perceived to construct community within present public discourse, and what kinds of community are formed when the importance of semantic song content fades. My approach is to conduct a content analysis of public discourse as it unfolds in the press and elsewhere online and survey the most common statements, thus revealing a set of basic assumptions pertaining to these issues. In the following, I will initially present an

overview and synthesis of the dominant themes in the discussions about community singing, including the most common arguments for its advantages. This will then provide the basis for a discussion about the social function of community singing in contemporary society. In conclusion, I suggest that community singing, rather than reinforcing existing social groups, creates its own emergent communities through the privileging of musical participation.

Why do we sing? A look at discourse

When trawling through the recurring discussions about community singing in popular media (papers, television, social media, etc.) one quickly gets an idea of just how wide-ranging the public interest in the subject is. In the current Danish media landscape, statements about the purpose of community singing appear over and over, though in different guises and on different platforms: primarily newspaper articles and features, websites of organizations promoting singing culture, advertisements and press coverages of singing events, etc. While the multitude of utterances conveys a complex image of the current debate on singing culture, my approach in the following is to break down this multitude of utterances into a few basic statements that are dominant in the debate.

The most ubiquitously present notion in the discourse is that community singing is fundamentally beneficial—an observation so pervading that it is almost never contested. This trend is in line with a broader tendency toward idealizing the social effects of music. Boeskov points out that there is a broad tradition of emphasizing music's advantages and disregarding its ambiguous or counterproductive aspects (2017). In his influential work on “musicking”, Christopher Small highlights the positive effects of music: “In musicking we have a tool in which our real concepts of ideal relationships can be reconciled, and the integrity of the person affirmed, explored and celebrated” (Small, 1998, p. 221). Such a celebratory attitude concerning community singing is widely shared in a Danish context. As noted by Boeskov, a quasi-hagiographic stance like this might disguise the possibility of music having negative effects or of positive and negative effects intermingling (2017, p. 94). This critical perspective is worth having in mind for the purpose of the present article, considering how community singing might also provoke social and cultural polarization and incidentally cause a feeling of exclusion. Born's work on the sociality of music, which I will discuss in the latter part of this article, poses a counterbalance to the one-sided focus on positive aspects: “Rather than conceive of social relations as organic or oriented to community, the intention must be to address them in all their complexity as constituted also by difference, contradiction and antagonism” (2012, p. 274).

The discussions about community singing are fraught with what Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 113) have termed *floating signifiers*, i.e. concepts that are too broad in scope to be unequivocally defined and hence open to semantic transpositions. Because of their open nature, floating signifiers acquire their meaning by their contingent placement in a given discursive context. There are several examples of this in the discourse on community singing. A core example is the term “community”, which is virtually always ascribed predominantly positive qualities while remaining for the most part undefined or even vague. A floating signifier like “community” is imbued with positive notions by way of a “chain of equivalence”, i.e. a discursive juxtaposition with presumed similar and inherently positive notions (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 127).

The arguments promoting the benefits of community singing can be roughly divided into three basic themes which I will deal with separately: The argument that singing promotes *health*, the argument that songs constitute important (cultural) *heritage*, and the argument from what I shall term *absolute singing*, i.e. the assertion of the autonomous value of singing. A note of clarification is due prior to dealing with the three themes in depth: health arguments concern the singing act while heritage arguments are mostly about songs as objects. These two types of argument are thus about fundamentally different empirical domains. The distinction corresponds to that of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage (<https://ich.unesco.org/>). Certain songs clearly hold an important position as artworks in Danish tangible cultural heritage, but the practice of singing together must be understood as something different, i.e. an intangible cultural heritage (Pedersen, 2017, p. 62). In a broader perspective, the attention to the performative act of singing inherent in the health argument aligns with the concept of musicking with which Small sought to point out that music is an activity rather than a static object (1998). The difference between health and heritage arguments within community singing culture is that they have opposite relations between means and end: the health argument asserts the importance of singing and assigns less significance to the specific songs that are utilized in this act. Conversely, the heritage argument considers the singing act a tool to preserve and disseminate culturally valued songs. Both arguments are valid and important, but they are not causally interconnected. While their recurring conflation possibly stems from a wish to mutually reinforce their persuasiveness, there is a risk of the opposite happening. There is a possibility of unintentionally implying either that the physical health benefits of singing are dependent on a certain canon of songs, or that the aesthetic value of culturally important songs cannot stand alone.

Health

The argument from health has its roots in a mounting corpus of research showing that singing breeds wellbeing, physically as well as mentally. Some of these health-promoting qualities are associated with singing in general, like the reduction of stress symptoms and the improvement of the immune system (Kreutz, G., Bongard, S., Rohrman, S., Hodapp, V., Grebe, D., 2004), increased lung capacity (Bonilha, A.G., Onofre, F., Vieira, M. L., Prado, M.Y.A., Martinez, J.A.B., 2009), and a general increase in life quality (Clift & Hancox, 2010). Other qualities are specific to the *collective* act of singing together and have positive effects on community building among singers, like the synchronization of heart rates (Vickhoff, 2013) and the release of oxytocin causing a feeling of social bonding (Tarr, B., Launay, J., Dunbar, R.I.M., 2014). Owing a great deal to the emergence of new institutions for the promotion of singing, this research is being disseminated to the general public and is now part of the awareness among practitioners and organizers within the community singing culture. The health benefits of singing are among the most frequently cited reasons for why we should sing.

“Singing makes you happy” is a pervasive axiom that can be said to fall within the psychological part of the health argument. Organizers very often promote singing events by referring to the fact that “singing makes people happy” (Höegh, 2010). Statements about the ability of singing to increase quality of life often appear in a chain of equivalence together with “community”, infusing the latter with positive significance. For example, in an inaugural speech for the organization *Sangens Hus*, Minister of Culture at the time, Marianne Jelved, stated that “singing breeds community, energy and happiness” (<https://sangenshus.dk/om-sangens-hus/>). Similarly, the Danish folk high schools launched an initiative in 2017 called “Syng, spis og snak” (“sing, eat and talk”), whose goal is to spread the “happiness of community singing” (<https://www.hojskolesangbogen.dk/syng-spis-og-snak/>). Furthermore, a large project titled *Alsang 2020* (“all-song”), organized by the association *Spil Dansk* aims to arrange a massive, nationwide community singing project culminating in 2020, and the director of Nordea Bank, which sponsors the project, states that it will create “social cohesion, community and ‘good lives’ around the country” (<https://spildansk.dk/nyheder/alsang-2020/>). Community singing may even be circumscribed as erotic due to its community-creating dynamics (Lægsgaard, 2018). In this way, the fairly open (“floating”) concept of community is fixated as something indisputably good by being ranked alongside positive concepts.

Another oft-cited psycho-social benefit, which I include under this section since it can be said to relate to issues of public health, is the ability of community singing to create mutual sympathy and overcome differences. Singing is reported to make people from different age groups bond (Lund & Kruse, 2019), to enhance integration (“Højskoler: Vi skeler ikke til, om sangtekster er krænkende”, 2018), and to include

people of different education levels (Gregersen, n.d.) and nationalities (Dannemand, 2013). In general, there is a widespread notion that community singing is inclusive—that it makes “room for all” and acts as a “bonding agent” (Gregersen, n.d.; Jensen, 2013). Together with the felt increase in personal happiness, this is among the main reasons provided for the increasing trend of implementing community singing in work places (Dannemand, 2013). Similar motives seem to lie behind the equally increasing implementation of community singing in schools. For example, a Danish high school in Morsø has produced a singing manifesto, in which happiness and the strengthening of a “common identity” across generations and cultural gaps are outlined as incentives (Nygaard, 2013).

The inclusivity trope found throughout the discourse on community singing (“room for all”) connects to the general concept of *community music* which is also often praised for its inclusivity. As with community singing, the positive notions circumscribing community music are, as noted by Kertz-Welzel, “difficult to challenge because they articulate a longing for inclusion and participation” (2016, 121). Notably, the use of the term “longing” implies that the appraised inclusivity is more of a desirable goal than an objective description of an actual state of things. This condition is problematic insofar as it renders the subject virtually inviolable. Hence, critical stances towards community singing are very scarce.

Heritage

The argument from heritage acclaims community singing as a channel for the preservation of Danish cultural heritage. At the core of this heritage lies what is often referred to as “den danske sangskat” (“the Danish song treasure”), an informal canon of culturally important songs. The argument from heritage occurs, for instance, when singing events are promoted explicitly as tributes to this canon, such as the event hosted by the music venue *Vega*, “Vega hylder den danske sangskat” (“Vega pays homage to the Danish song treasure”). There is a widely felt responsibility among advocates of community singing to ensure that the canon is preserved and handed down to future generations. In March 2018, Danish national TV broadcast a live sing-along show titled “Live fra Højskolesangbogen” (“Live from the Folk High School Songbook”), and among the explicit intentions with the show was to introduce the common cultural heritage of songs to those unfamiliar with it (Kahr, 2018).

The heritage argument tends to focus on songs primarily as texts. Thus, the cultural relevance of songs is often substantiated by the fact that they are a source to knowledge about history (Burhøi, 2006; Jensen, 2013; Iversen, 2014), or that they are valuable pieces of literature, in which case it is often implied that the role of music is merely to mediate poetry that would otherwise pass into oblivion (Dannemand, 2013). Songs might also be used to reinforce national identity, notably in political

contexts in which historical patriotic songs can be construed as symbols of Danish nationality and a shared national heritage. At first glance, this tendency seems to go against the idea of a melocentric turn. However, the focus on texts as documents of the *past* shows that even when words are considered the essential part of singing, this is no longer necessarily because they communicate messages that are relevant *today*.

Although seen more rarely, the heritage argument may also stress the musical side of songs. For instance, Aarhus Theater staged a popular theater concert in 2017 entitled “Lyden af de skuldre vi står på” (“The sound of the shoulders we stand on”). Rock musician Simon Kvamm and sound artist Marie Højlund, who arranged the music that was based on well-known folk songs and hymns, stated in an interview that their ambition was to focus on the sound and the melodies of Danish songs. Their explicit aim was to explore what would happen if, “for once”, words were not in focus (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4aXNlD3Ru0>). This last statement alludes to the longstanding logocentric bias in the discourse on singing. “The sound of the shoulders we stand on” can thus be construed as an artistic meta-reflection on the general melocentric turn in contemporary singing culture.

The arguments from health and from heritage are often aligned, as for example in *Sangens Hus*’ establishment of so-called singing kindergartens with the double objective of fostering happiness and providing understanding of culture and history. Similarly, in the above cited opening speech for *Sangens Hus*, Jelved further stated that in addition to the health benefits of singing, each generation should be able to share “our national and international song treasures”. In some instances, the health benefits of singing are even implied to be dependent on a specific repertoire of songs (Iversen, 2014). It would be relevant to note here that the empirical research often referred to as a basis for the health argument does not in general provide evidence for the assumption that certain songs or repertoires are more health beneficial than others.

Absolute singing¹

In addition to the arguments from health and heritage, there is a discursive trend towards an aesthetics of autonomy of singing, i.e. the idea that community singing constitutes its own purpose, independent of external factors. This particular notion is what I will term *absolute singing*. One of the most substantial indicators of the primacy of absolute singing is the widespread focus on the quantitative aspects of singing. This can be regarding the number of participants, as when for example the organization Sangvær aims to facilitate nationwide singing sessions every Wednesday morning that will reach as many as 10,000 people singing simultaneously across the country. It may also be in terms of the quantity of songs, as exemplified by the goal of the above-mentioned singing show “Live fra Højskolesangbogen”, in which the hosts at the outset professed the aspiration of singing as much as 160

songs in the course of the event. Or it might be regarding the duration of the singing session. An apt example here is the emergence of the social genre of marathon singing. Marathon singing is an event in which people gather to sing together for an extended period of time while working through many or all of the theme sections in the employed songbook (typically the Folk High School Songbook) (<https://www.hojskolesangbogen.dk/syng-med/maratomsang/21-juni-2019-vartov-koebenhavn/>), but it can also be church hymns (<https://www.sundbykirke.dk/page/8256/salmemaraton-2018-19>). As indicated by the design of the event as well as by the name itself, marathon singing is about the sheer duration of the singing act. On the website of one of the organizers of these events it is indicated that a singing marathon is officially defined as a session lasting longer than 4 hours and 21.95 minutes—an adaptation of the distance of a running marathon (<https://www.hojskolesangbogen.dk/syng-med/maratomsang/>).

Absolute singing is purposeless. In the absence of an underlying purpose, community singing is construed as a liberating space (Ballund, 2019). In the same vein, community singing is even understood as useless in a positive sense, and it is correspondingly contrasted with the pressures of living in a goal-oriented age (Lægsgaard, 2018). The tendency toward absolute singing springs from a denunciation of the need to legitimize singing through external factors—such as the health argument. The idea is that the scientific insights into the health advantages of singing ostensibly entail a danger of reducing singing to a means to an end (Ballund, 2019). This reductionism is perceived as unfortunate as it fails to grasp the uniqueness of singing as a form of utterance (Dannemand, 2013).

If singing is able to express something otherwise inexpressible, this seems to be largely an effect of musical performance. Hence, utterances that would probably be uneasy to say somehow become less problematic when sung. The dogmatic or archaic statements in hymn texts or the explicitly nationalist proclamations of patriotic songs are examples of content that would, to many in contemporary society, seem inappropriate to utter without the accompaniment of music. Yet, the words are easily accepted when sung. It seems that singing lends a mitigating effect to the ideological content. Indeed, there are even reports that the meaning of the sung words may pass by unremarked in the singing act (Kristensen, 2019). This is another circumstance that points to the melocentric turn in contemporary community singing: the important thing is the act of singing itself—the question of what we sing is less significant.

Musically imagined singing communities

There is, then, a widely held—and scientifically supported—view that singing triggers the construction of community in the sense of concrete collective identifica-

tions. In pursuing the question of how this happens, it is essential to keep in mind that song is a combination of music and words, and both these media can convey community, though not in the same way. In the words of Lawrence Zbikowski (2016, p. 5), words and music go in different directions: “words toward the definite and concrete, and music toward the allusive and ephemeral”. The verbal side of songs thus points to more clearly defined communities than the musical. This is probably why community-building in singing is commonly thought to be afforded by song *texts*. Indeed, the vast occurrence of deictic markers like “we” and “I” in lyrics can take on a strong suggestive force and interpellate singers, in the Althusserian sense, into the community expressed by the sung words (Eriksen, 2013, p. 195). Consequently, music is often thought to be a mere amplifier of the verbal message (Cook, 1998, p. 21). Yet, research into the social functions of music has shown that we need to conceive of musical performance as not merely reflecting preexisting social formations, but rather as producing its own emergent communities (DeNora, 2000, p. 44; Martin, 2006, p. 64).

Planes of sociality in community singing

In order to shed light on the process of community building in singing, I will examine current Danish community singing culture through a theoretical framework on the sociality of music developed by Georgina Born. According to Born, there are four planes of social mediation of music. First, there are the concrete microsocial communities, such as musical ensembles, performance situations, etc. Second, there are what Born terms “musically imagined communities”, i.e. virtual communities that arise when music spawn collective identifications. The third plane refers to music’s entanglement with external social segments such as race, class, gender, age, etc. Fourth, music is bound up with the institutions—cultural, religious, economic, etc.—that facilitate its production and reception (Born, 2011, p. 378).

The first plane of sociality in community singing can be divided into traditional singing settings and more novel ones, the latter corresponding to the above-described absolute singing events. The first thing to keep in mind is that the practice of community singing (aside from singing in church) only goes back a couple of centuries to when the right social conditions emerged, such as the rising of the nation state. According to Danish song researcher Kirsten Sass Bak, the emergence of community singing is in itself proof of the national identification that was taking place from the late 18th century (Bak, 2005, p. 100). It is striking that while the new forms of community singing that we are witnessing today basically emanate from this tradition, they differ from it precisely in that they have dispensed with the necessity for such an external societal incitement.

Surely, traditional types of community singing still persist. People still sing in churches, schools, at meetings, parties, etc. Moreover, just as singing has continu-

ously served the purpose of reinforcing Danish national identity and has blossomed in times of nationalist uprising, such as the German occupation in the 1940's or the 1972 referendum on whether Denmark should join the European Economic Community, singing plays a similar role today, as expressions of nationalist views and advocacy of the preservation of cultural heritage rise in the face of growing globalization and increasing immigration.

However, the new performance-oriented singing events, in which the singing act itself is the central happening regardless of any external contexts, are becoming ever more significant. It even seems that the new tendency towards absolute singing has infiltrated some of the traditional community singing scenes. Thus, for example, churches have begun organizing “fællessangsgudstjenester” (“community singing services”), in which the performance of community singing exceeds the significance of the ritual and religious content of the event. Indeed, the songs employed at such services need not even be expressive of Christian values, but are often songs from popular artists such as ABBA, Elvis, Justin Bieber etc. Community singing is progressively being elevated from its ancillary state towards a central position, even in traditional settings such as church services that used to employ singing as more of an accessory.

The second plane in Born's typology deals with what she terms musically-imagined communities. According to Born, music's lack of denotative meaning (unlike visual arts or literature) is precisely what makes it apt to create imagined, virtual, and hence more connotative, communities (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 32). If community singing came into being as a result of social exigence and used to be deeply interlinked with external ideological purposes such as fortifying national identity, it seems puzzling that it has far from vanished in the current age of dwindling ideological common ground. The ability of music to create imagined communities provide an explanation for this: While song texts are apt at reinforcing extant communities, musical performance may generate communities that are more ephemeral and less binding. Because of the medial balance shift towards musical performance over verbal messages, musically imagined communities are now among the prominent forms of community that are constituted in singing. Part of what the previously cited empirical research on the health benefits of singing has shown is that singing mediates a particularly *fast* social bonding (Pearce, E., Launay, J., Dunbar, R.I.M., 2015). This may very well be due to the transient nature of musically imagined community which does not require an extensive and long-acquired shared worldview among singers. Indeed, even though song texts may often convey a specific worldview, singers are no longer required to agree with it. The musically imagined community thus bypasses the impulse to proclaim a shared ideological community and shortcuts to a community solely based on participation in performance.

The increasing centrality of absolute singing may become clearer in comparison with a historical case. In 1940, at the outset of German occupation, large singing rallies called *Alsang* emerged across Denmark in response to the uncertain political situation. This practice gradually spread to the whole country and reached a number of singing participants as high as 700,000 (Nielsen, 2011). While on the surface resembling today's singing events, the 1940 *Alsang* meetings differed by having a clearly defined external purpose, i.e. the spurring of national group identity in resistance to the occupational force. Consider now the previously mentioned project *Alsang 2020*. As indicated by the name, this project refers to the historical singing events 80 years ago. However, this time, there is no acute or concrete incidence provoking it. The two events do have in common that they both acclaim the notion of freedom. Yet, *Alsang* in 1940 was about a much more specific concept of freedom than *Alsang 2020*. In a foreword to the songbook that was published and employed during the 1940 singing events, Danish author Vilhelm Andersen wrote in a sinister tone about the "shadow of an unknown destiny" lying behind the need to meet in singing (Hye-Knudsen et al., 1940, p. 4). *Alsang* in 1940 promoted freedom from a concrete enemy, whereas *Alsang 2020's* concept of freedom is much more open and non-teleological: Aside from commemorating the liberation in 1945, *Alsang 2020* intends to acclaim the "democratic free and open spaces of the present and future" (<https://spildansk.dk/nyheder/alsang-2020/>).

The association of community singing with freedom is interesting in itself. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2001, p. 4) describes the relation between freedom and community as inversely proportioned: Because freedom is linked to individuality, gaining community entails giving up freedom. From this perspective, the pursuit of freedom through the community of singing seems discordant. Moreover, according to Bauman, the reason why "community"—unlike synonyms such as "society"—is not merely neutral, but ascribed positive notions, is that community provides an alternative in an age in which the individual feels alone. "Community' is nowadays another name for paradise lost", Bauman contends (2001, p. 3). This, in addition to the chains of equivalence analyzed above, provides further motivation for the positive connotations of community in the current discourse. Bauman's sense of community resembles Born's musically imagined community in that it is virtual. The imaginary nature of current singing communities might be precisely why the linking of community with freedom is in this case unproblematic: Because these communities are not grounded on extra-musical social relations, they are not binding beyond the framings of the ephemeral singing situation and hence do not limit individual freedom.

The third plane of sociality concerns how community singing fits with wider social segments such as class, age groups etc. The various traditional settings for singing that I identified in the first plane typically appeal to corresponding groups

of, say, religious or political nature. However, the newer kind of community singing events that I have discussed overarch these segments. When focus is on the singing performance and not on communicating common values, the prerequisite of belonging to a certain social segment is dismantled. Large-scale singing events can thus theoretically appeal to participants from all segments, and the repertoire of songs employed within the same event can stretch from hymns over historical war songs to pop songs and beyond (on the diversity of repertoire at contemporary singing events, see further Borčak, 2018). When it is the intent to cover all of the versatile themes of a songbook, like in the singing marathons, it means that semantic themes of song texts are no longer determinate for the singing act. Ironically, many of the song texts employed in community singing do outline a fairly delimited community, for example regarding patriotism or religious observance, but the autonomy of musical performance exempts singers from submitting to it. Thus, a curious situation arises in which the musical *performance* of songs facilitate the overcoming of the very social segregations that song *texts* would maintain.

Regarding the fourth social plane, i.e. the institutions of community singing, all of the newly emerged organizations for the promotion of singing discussed in this article are evidence of the increasing importance of absolute singing. Although all of these institutions certainly must be credited for drawing attention to both the health benefits and the cultural heritage value of singing, their *raison d'être* is very much based on the premise of the intrinsic value of singing. With respect to the institutionalization of community singing it is, again, interesting to consider the similarity between community singing and the broader concept of community music, since these two related phenomena differ in their stance towards musical institutions. Community music proponents are skeptical of formal musical education and privilege informal and non-elitist music making and “cultural democracy” (Kertz-Welzel, 2016, 116). While certainly also centering on the democratic and non-professional qualities of musical performance, community singing on the other hand adapts unproblematically to musical institutionalization. While community music as a concept is a product of the counterculture of the 1960' and 1970's and thus, as it were, born into opposition towards established institutions, the Danish tradition of community singing arose earlier and in tandem with the emergence of some of the institutions that are still pivotal to Danish musical education and culture today, notably the public school and the folk high school. It bears mention, however, that community singing has not been at the center of attention of academic musical institutions. This is due in part to the fact that community singing is an “applied art” and thus has commonly been perceived as circumventing the standards of high culture and in part to the disciplinary segregations of universities for which a concept like community singing lingers awkwardly between musi-

cology, comparative literature, religious studies, sociology, anthropology etc. (on the disciplinary limbo of singing, see also Kuhn, 1990, p. 4).

To sum up this extrapolation of the four planes of sociality: Traditional singing settings in general have clearly demarcated communicative purposes. Hymn singing responds to the gospel of the day, patriotic songs consolidate national identity, protest songs express political opposition etc. In contrast, since absolute singing events have no purpose other than the singing act itself, participants need not fit into pre-given social categories expressed in song *texts*. They are free to step in and out of the musically imagined community. In the case of absolute singing, musical performance does more than reinforce preexisting identities, it actually becomes a “primary vehicle for collective identification” (Born, 2011, p. 382).

Participation, inclusion and exclusion in community singing

A crucial part of what legitimizes the autonomous value of singing is, as we have seen, its ability to create social bonds among singers. The success of this bonding effect depends on active participation. Thomas Turino defines “participatory performance” as having “no artist-audience distinctions”, as opposed to “presentational performance”, where the active performer presents something to a passive audience (2008, p. 26). This definition of participatory performance corresponds exactly to community singing in which the role of communicator and recipient coincide and requires no passive audience. Considering the omnipresence of the inclusivity trope discussed above, this participatory quality is probably one of the crucial aspects explaining its increasing popularity. According to Turino, presentational performance—with its gulf between the idolized star performer and the venerating spectators—is usually ascribed higher cultural value. This is due in part to the privileging of musical professionalism and in part to the widespread notion of music as an object rather than a social practice (e.g. the prevalence of recordings over liveness), the very same notion that is the object of Small’s critique of Western music history. Turino challenges the assumption that the amateurishness and informality of participatory performance somehow makes it inferior—rather, participatory performance should be valued in its own right (2008, p. 24-25). This, it would seem, is a stance shared by many in the current discourse on community singing.

As noted earlier, any community singing performance always already entails the possibility of exclusion. A case in point occurred when the anti-racist association “Skansen mod Nazisme” in 2001 succeeded in displacing a group of neo-Nazis from their residence in the town of Nørresundby by gathering and singing in the street every night for over two years (“Nazidom vækker nordjysk jubel”). In this case, far from making “room for all”, community singing was employed as a tool for exclusion. Though hardly as blatant, similar estranging and exoticizing effects can arise whenever participants in community singing are unable to identify with the

messages expressed in the song text. As a consequence of the high public interest in the subject of community singing right now, notable examples of such disturbances occasionally go viral in Danish press. In 2018, the case of a teacher of non-Danish ethnic background at the Copenhagen Business School who had purportedly complained about the joint singing at a school meeting of the popular patriotic song “Den danske sang er en ung, blond pige” (“The Danish Song is a Young, Blond Girl”) made it into several Danish media (Maach, 2018). In 2019, the possibility of a song titled “Ramadan in Copenhagen” entering the next edition of the Folk High School Songbook made national headlines and caused a heated debate over what kinds of “Danishness” the songbook should represent. These examples illuminate the fact that the inclusivity of community singing might prove to be illusory when put to the test.

In instances like these, what spurs provocation is often the content of a song text. It appears that cases of disruption become the very cause for a societal reflection on a song text that normally is performed almost automatically and without much thought or critical attention. In the majority of instances, when community singing does not give rise to conflict, the deeper layers of meaning in song texts, even if potentially provocative, can go unnoticed in performance. In this sense, the occasional conflicts become the exceptions that affirm the broader tendency toward a melocentric turn. Moreover, exclusion can also occur under less extreme circumstances, for example, when participants are unfamiliar with performed songs or uncomfortable with singing. Thus, the failure of the ideal of inclusivity, which is central to any community singing event, need not be linked to experience of provocative verbal content.

Concluding remarks

Throughout history, community singing has served external social functions, such as worship, national identification, etc. In the wake of the melocentric turn, i.e. a move from verbal to musical primacy, modern community singing events now breed musically imagined communities that are volatile, ephemeral and emergent rather than stable and ideologically demarcated. Of the three main arguments for singing studied here (health, heritage and absolute singing), the latter points most clearly to this primacy of musical performance. However, all three arguments are symptomatic of an increasing interest in the inherent value of singing rather than in any ideological purpose that singing has been brought to serve. Even the heritage argument, which emphasizes song texts as culturally important art works, is most often based on the idea of songs as documents of our shared past rather than as voices of relevance in our times.

The participatory element crucial to community singing is challenged whenever clashes do occur between the utopian community produced by musical performance and the empirical reality of external social (ideological, ethnic, religious, political, cultural, etc.) differences. The question needs to be raised whether the omnipresent inclusivity trope expresses an actual state or rather a romanticized ideal.

Many song texts that have reached canon status within the Danish cultural heritage imply social segregations (national, religious, etc.) that would previously determine the function of the songs. One could have assumed that this repertoire would be losing relevance in today's multicultural and ideologically eclectic society. However, that has turned out not to be the case. Although there are sporadic calls for a rebooting of the traditional song repertoire to reflect current society, in general contemporary community singing makes use of a historically broad and diverse spectrum of song texts quite regardless of whether or not they are relevant to modern living conditions. This semantic flexibility can be regarded as a symptom of the melocentric turn. Current community singing culture has thus produced a paradoxical situation in which the social borders upheld verbally in song texts can be superseded by participation in musical performance.

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Notes

- 1 While this neologism does, of course, allude to the 19th century distinction between absolute music and program music, obviously the notion of “absolute” is used in a very different way here. Singing is, by definition, not absolute in the sense of free from connections to other art forms such as words. In this context, I use the term to refer to the discursive construct of singing as freed from external purposes such as health-improving or heritage-preserving.