

THE SINGING DANES

On top of our family piano when I was a boy were two books, one brown one blue, with identical titles – ‘Community Song Book’. They contained a wealth of songs, with classics like ‘My Bonnie lies over the Ocean’ and ‘Pollywolly Doodle’, but also some songs that were good poems set to music, such as ‘Drink to Me only with thine Eyes’ (Ben Jonson’s ‘Song to Celia’ [1616]) and ‘Down by the Salley Gardens’ (Yeats [1899]). They seemed esoteric in a way, the sort of song to be sung by a soloist with piano accompaniment, rather than songs for everyone to join in – not the sort of thing people spontaneously sang at social gatherings. And I cannot recall any family occasion where that was the case.

Danes are different. They love to sing together on festive occasions. So the obvious question is: Why do Danes like to sing together? Part of the answer is that the Danes are a clannish people, with a multitude of subclans. Danes will form clubs and associations whenever given the slightest chance. Danes love to meet in different constellations and feel part of something. Family celebrations, birthday parties and wedding anniversaries, though, are where Danes perhaps sing most. Guests come with their own lyrics to well-known tunes, telling stories and anecdotes about those being celebrated, copies are handed round and everyone joins in. But this is only one type of song. For Danes also sing many of their famous poems, since set to music, on such occasions. Poetry and community singing go together in Denmark. But has this always been so?

Until the 19th century, most of the poetic texts were hymns and were sung in church or family. But during the 19th century a tradition for community singing gradually developed that has lasted to the present day.

Some of the reasons are historical. Denmark has changed shape considerably over the years, but the period from 1773 to 1921 is particularly interesting in explaining the Danes’ deep interest in their identity. What makes a Dane? What does it mean to be Danish?

From the Reformation to the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1536-1814) Denmark ruled Norway, along with its former possessions of Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Until the mid-17th century, it also owned parts of southern and western Sweden. When Norway was handed over to Sweden in 1815, in exchange for land in Pomerania and Rügen, its kingdom to the south included all of Schleswig-Holstein, i.e. Denmark stretched down past Kiel and nearly included Hamburg and Lübeck. It held both duchies until 1864, when they were lost to Germany. This situation lasted until after the Second World War, when a referendum was held and northern Schleswig voted to return to Denmark. It is now called Sønderjylland.

Why mention all this? Because Schleswig-Holstein was an area with two languages, two cultures. To the north, Danish speakers were in the majority;

to the south, German speakers. Even today you find German schools in Sønderjylland and Danish schools in Südschleswig. But in the first part of the 19th century, after the education act of 1814, which had been influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, children were to be taught to read – and to read poetic texts. During that period there was also more focus on the concept of the fatherland and an upsurge of National Romanticism.

By far the most important hymn and song writer of the 19th century in Denmark was the vicar, theologian, thinker, writer and poet N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), a man of innovative and sometimes polemical views who was sentenced to life-censorship in 1825, but granted a royal reprieve by the absolutist king Christian VIII in 1837. By then, people in northern Schleswig were beginning to call for a free constitution. In 1840, the king made Danish the official legal language in the areas where it was used in churches and schools and also made it an official spoken language. This led in 1843 to public meetings being held at a hill, Skamlingsbanken, which lies on the border with Schleswig. Grundtvig was an active supporter of the mother tongue, since all Danes should use their own language and, like birds, 'sing with their own beak', as he put it. For the second meeting he wrote a song, a community song for all to sing. And this song is the first one we are going to look at, since, set to music by Erik Grip in 1983 and included on an LP (in those days) devoted to Grundtvig songs, it has become one of the best-loved community songs Danes have, now included in the Folk High School Song Book – to which I will return in a moment. What present-day singers may not realise, for only six of the eight verses are normally sung, is that this song is an impassioned plea for the Danish king to allow all Danes to learn and use their language, and thereby find their true identity as thinking human beings and not mere subjects who blindly obey their king. He has to tread warily in the song, for the king is an absolute ruler until 1849, when the Danes get their constitution.

VELKOMMEN I DEN GRØNNE LUND

(YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPqAupaDWo0>)

Thrice welcome to the leafy grove (1843) [HSSB 155]

Thrice welcome to the leafy grove,
where birds are sweetly singing!
Let too the Danish tongue now prove
its song can set things ringing.

For all in all we're well off here,
like those of old who bore us
God willing, may the day be near
when more still lies before us.

Our king, a trusty friend is he,
his words like gold we treasure:
'Come hither, good Danes, tell to me
where you've been served short measure!'

If we could all our mouths command
to more besides just eating,
Each second child in Denmark's land
would grasp what won't need speaking.

Not much is needed joy to share
and present lacks to banish,
a little though, both here and there,
that's what is truly Danish.

On Skamling hill the other day
a little bird sang clearly,
and 'twould be shame to hide away
the thoughts that all felt dearly.

Proud lions adorn the Danish shield
bestrewn with hearts unshrinking,
since days of old they hold the field,
not miming apes unthinking.

Each bird its special song must find,
for life would without singing
be merely drudgery and grind.
So welcome, hear it ringing!

At precisely this period, the first Danish Folk High School came into being, followed by many more in the following half century. It was the realisation of Grundtvig's dream of popular education, for he strongly believed that true democracy could only come if Danes were freed from an elitist education for the few and all, especially those in rural areas, were given a chance to become enlightened individuals. His poems and hymns, of which there are a vast number, have three main strands: the Dane as a thinking individual, the Dane as a Christian, the Dane as a proud member of the nation. This last strand is of course very much in evidence in songs written after the loss of much Danish territory in 1864 – a traumatic event for Denmark. This was summed up in 1872 by a Dane by the name of Holst: 'Hvad udad tabes, skal indad vindes' (What is outwardly lost must be inwardly won). In other words, the way to recover a Danish identity was to immerse oneself in Danish culture.

In 1894, the first Folk High School Song Book was published. Up to the latest edition, it had sold 2.4 million copies. The new edition (the 18th) has once more taken certain songs out and put new ones in. This book is so popular that copies are normally available for many social occasions and gatherings. It has the songs arranged according to themes, so Danes always know where to look when they want a song about, say, 'Life', or 'Morning'.

The next song has music by Carl Nielsen, Denmark's most famous composer. Nielsen set many poems to music, some of which have become much-loved community songs. One of the best-known is that of Jens Roadman, a

propagandist poem, requested by the author of the newspaper *Politiken* and printed in it on 22 June 1905. The music for it was written by Carl Nielsen the following year.

Jens Roadman [HSSB 100]

Who's sitting by the shelter
with hands where rags do cling,
with eye-patch made of leather
and shoes held on with string?
It's no one but Jens Roadman
who must, shall he be fed,
transform with his own hammer
the hard stones into bread.

And should you wake one morning
as dawn begins to soar
and hear a hammer clanging
once more, once more, once more,
It's no one but Jens Roadman
on old legs once so true
who sends wild sparks a-flying
from stones now wet with dew.

And should you travel townwards
behind the farmer's mares,
and pass beside an old man
eyes watering with tears –
It's no one but Jens Roadman,
straw-clad round legs and knees,
who seeks in vain for shelter
so he won't have to freeze.

And should you journey homewards
while showers and gales molest,
the evening star a-trembling
from cold in due southwest,
and hear the hammer singing
behind you close somewhere –
It's no one but Jens Roadman
who still is sitting there.

And so he smoothed for others
the road that's hard to go,
but when it came to Christmas
his arm said to him 'No.'
'Twas no one but Jens Roadman,
his hammer fell from sight,
they bore him o'er the heath on
a cold December night.

There stands within the churchyard
a board now half-decayed;
that skews obliquely sideways,
its paintwork faint and frayed.
It's no one but Jens Roadman,
his life was full of stones,
but on his grave they gave him
not one to mark his bones.

One of the things that can be noticed here is praise of the common man, a theme also present in the last song I have chosen, but now with a self-ironic twist so typical of Danes, who like to insist there is nothing special about them but that even so they have a capacity to enjoy the simple things in life.

The last song has text and lyrics by one and the same man, Benny Andersen, who is one of the most popular poets in Denmark. He was born in 1929 and has been publishing collections of poems since 1960. One of his biggest hits was a slim book published in 1972 called 'Svantes viser' (Svante's Songs), purportedly written by a semi-drunken Swedish cynic called Svante. The songs were recorded by Poul Dissing and the LP released the following year.

SVANTES LYKKELIGE DAG

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhrPgbIHVAQ&feature=related>)

They were a huge success. And the song that has really become a classic, which is sung by young and old alike, is one where Svante, content for once, contemplates his naked wife Nina after her shower, consumes his breakfast and looks forward to his coffee, which is almost ready. The refrain is part of the common consciousness in Denmark: *Livet er ikke det værste man har, Og om lidt er kaffen klar!*

Svante's happy day [HSSB 21]

See how the day's begun!
Warm is the round red sun.
Nina is showering at ease.
I'm eating bread and cheese.
Life's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Flowers start to flower once more.
Spiders run down the door.
Birds fly in flocks through the air
when there are birds to spare.
Joy's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Green is the grass and wet.
None of the bees need fret.
Suck in the air till it's spent.
Oh, get that bindweed scent!
Bliss's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

In wafts a shower-time song.
She's really going strong.
Outside the sky is quite blue.
I can approve that too –
Joy's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.

Now Nina comes right in,
naked, with moist warm skin,
kisses me fondly, still bare
goes off to do her hair.
Life's not the worst thing around so they say
and the coffee's on its way.