



Songs of the Germans from Russia. The Old Colony Mennonite Perspective / Die Lieder der Russlanddeutschen. Aus der Perspektive der alten Mennoniten

Author(s): Wesley Berg

Source: *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture*, 47. Jahrg., (2002), pp. 59-76

Published by: Deutsches Volksliedarchiv

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3595184>

Accessed: 08/05/2008 14:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=dv>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SONGS OF THE GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

The Old Colony Mennonite Perspective

WESLEY BERG

The widespread dispersal of German-speaking settlers throughout much of Europe and many parts of the world has provided scholars interested in comparative studies of German folk melodies with a rich field of study. As songs have been collected in settlements outside Germany, and as the descendants of emigrants who left a century or more ago have returned to Germany, it has been possible to collect variants of traditional melodies that have demonstrated the never ending creativity with which these melodies are treated.

In the 20th century one of the most fruitful and abundant sources of melodies of this kind has been found among the Germans from Russia, the German colonists who settled in Ukraine and other parts of Russia and eastern Europe during the reign of Catherine the Great in the late 18th century. The main settlements were in what is now Ukraine and along the Volga River. There is another source of melismatic singing among German-speaking colonists in Russia that has not yet been studied as thoroughly in the context of the singing of the Germans from Russia. This is the hymn tradition of the Old Colony Mennonite congregations of Northern Alberta, Belize, and Mexico whose ancestors brought an oral tradition of singing chorales from Russia to North America in the late 19th century. I have discussed this tradition and its relationship to the Old Way of Singing, a term used to describe the singing style found in 17th-century English parish churches, early 18th-century New England Congregational churches, and Southern Baptist churches in the United States, elsewhere.¹ The Old

1 Berg, Wesley: *Old Colony Mennonite Hymns and the Old Way of Singing*. In: *The Musical Quarterly* 80 (Spring 1996), pp. 71–117. On the Old Way of Singing,

Colony Mennonite way of singing is important because it exists in a relatively pristine condition in a number of communities in which it is still a living tradition. It is the purpose of this essay to compare Old Colony Mennonite singing styles and the oral singing traditions of German colonists who, like the Mennonites of the Vistula Delta near Danzig in Prussian Poland, responded to the invitation contained in Catherine the Great's manifestos of 1762, 1763 and 1785 inviting foreign settlers to populate the steppes of Southern Russia.²

There are several reasons for finding such a comparison useful. Although living alongside Germans in Russia, Mennonites were a distinct group, not associated in significant cultural ways with their German neighbors, primarily because of their religion, which permeated every aspect of life, including the disposition of civil matters. They did share the privileges granted by Catherine the Great, among the most important of which were the possibility of settling in self-contained colonies on large areas of land, the right to a large measure of internal self-government in these colonies, and freedom from military service.³ Economically they seem to have been slightly more advanced than many German colonies, especially in the Volga region.⁴ An oral tradition of singing chorales in a melismatic style was sustained without interruption in at least some parts of the Russian Mennonite colonies for almost a century until the departure of a group of Mennonites to Canada in 1874 in response to increasingly na-

see Temperley, Nicholas: *The Old Way of Singing: Its Origin and Development*. In: Journal of the American Musicological Society 34 (1981), pp. 511–544.

2 Bartlett, Roger P.: *Human Capital: The settlement of foreigners in Russia 1762–1894*. Cambridge 1979, pp. 35–56, 121; Fleischhauer, Ingeborg: *Die Deutschen im Zarenreich: Zwei Jahrhunderte deutsch-russische Kulturgemeinschaft*. Stuttgart 1986; and Long, James W.: *From Privileged to Dispossessed: The Volga Germans, 1860–1917*. Lincoln, London 1988. For the Mennonite story see Urry, James: *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1889*. Winnipeg 1989; and *Mennonites in Russia 1788–1988: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz*. Ed. by John Friesen. Winnipeg 1989.

3 Bartlett: *Human Capital*, pp. 47–48. For a brief sketch of the relations between Mennonites and German colonists in the 1870s, see Urry: *None But Saints*, pp. 260–63.

4 See Long: *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, pp. 76, 129, 184, for an assessment of Mennonite farming practices in relation to those of the Volga Germans.

tionistic policies being promulgated by the Russian government during this period.⁵ The members of a portion of this group, now known as the Old Colony Mennonites, have preserved the tradition to this day.

Johann Windholz surveyed the state of research into the musical traditions of the Germans from Russia in a recent article.⁶ He emphasises two main discoveries found in the many collections of songs and song texts: 1) the fact that the songs collected in the colonies both in Russia and in other settlements in South and North America tend to be more archaic in style than their counterparts in Germany, and 2) the discovery that many of the songs were being sung in a melismatic style that could not be found in Germany. He cites the pioneering work of Georg Schünemann, who collected 434 songs in prisoner of war camps in 1917 and 1918.⁷ One of the most important discoveries Schünemann made was the melismatic, ornamented singing style of the German colonists, which he explained by pointing to similar singing styles among the Russian peasants among whom they lived. He also noted that German settlers from regions closer to Germany and Austria had been influenced by printed song books and urban culture, unlike the colonists from Ukraine, the Volga region, and Siberia, who continued to speak old dialects betraying no contact with their former homeland.⁸

Shortly thereafter Victor Shirmunski's work in a colony on the Dniepr River suggested to him that in fact the melismatic singing style might not

5 Loewen, Harry: *A House Divided: Russian Mennonite Nonresistance and Emigration in the 1870s*. In: *Mennonites in Russia 1788—1988* [Friesen], pp. 127—43.

6 Windholz, Johann: *Schwindendes Erbe: Mündliche Überlieferung der Russlanddeutschen*. In: *Die Russlanddeutschen, Gestern und Heute*. Ed. by Boris Meissner and others. Köln 1992, pp. 239—51.

7 Schünemann, Georg: *Das Lied der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland: Mit 434 in deutschen Kriegsgefangenenlagern gesammelten Liedern*. Munich 1923 (Sammelbände für vergl. Musikwissensch. 3). Another important source of song texts is Klein, Victor: *Unversiegbarer Born: Vom Wesen des Volkslied der Sowjetdeutschen*. Alma-Ata 1974. Klein (1909—1975), a gifted and prolific amateur folklorist, born in a village in the Volga region, became a school teacher in 1959 in Novosibirsk, Siberia, where many Germans (and Mennonites) had been resettled during the 1930s.

8 Schünemann: *Das Lied der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland*, p. x.

have been borrowed from Russian neighbors. Melismatic singing could be found in German colonies all over the Soviet Union, in various kinds of settings. He asserted that such singing styles can be found in isolated areas of Germany as well. Two young women serving as informants demonstrated for him the ways in which differences could arise. One was a farm girl from a poor rural family, the other was a young woman from a wealthy family who had vocal training, a gramophone in the house and who sang in a choir. The first woman's singing differed in a number of respects from the second: her song repertoire was much richer and more archaic, she took pleasure in repetitions of text and music, and her performances were drawn out and richly ornamented. The second woman generally preferred a purer melodic line and obviously had been influenced by a literate European musical culture.⁹

Shirmunski's interpretation is supported by two more recent scholars dealing with the musical traditions of German colonies on the Volga River.¹⁰ Wolfgang Wittrock gives three reasons: 1) melismatic singing of folk tunes could also be found in widely separated pockets of German settlement in Eastern Europe; 2) older singers tend to sing in a more melismatic style than younger singers; and 3) tunes collected in other regions of Europe where German was spoken also reveal melismatic tendencies.¹¹

Wolfgang Suppan expands the argument by pointing to collections of melodies from areas like Scandinavia, Romania, Macedonia, the Alps, Corsica and the Faroe Islands, areas in which oral transmission rather than notated music was the norm.¹² He includes a telling quotation from a work

9 Shirmunski, Victor: *Alte und neue Volkslieder aus der bayrischen Kolonie Jamburg am Dnjepr*. In: *Das deutsche Volkslied* 33 (Jan./Febr. 1931), p. 4.

10 Wittrock, Wolfgang: *Zum melismatischen Singen der Wolgadeutschen*. In: Fs. Walter Wiora. Ed. by Ludwig Finscher and Christoph-Helmut Mahling. Kassel 1967, pp. 648–50; and Suppan, Wolfgang: *Das melismatische Singen der Wolga-Deutschen in seinem historischen und geographischen Kontext*. In: *Studia instrumentorum musicae popularis* III. Fs. Ernst Emsheimer on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Ed. by Gustaf Hilleström. Stockholm 1974, pp. 237–43.

11 Wittrock: *Zum melismatischen Singen der Wolgadeutschen*, p. 649.

12 Suppan: *Das melismatische Singen der Wolga-Deutschen*, pp. 239–40. See also his *Untersuchungen zum Lied-Repertoire des Russlanddeutschen Georg Sanger aus Leichtling an der Wolga*. In: *Jahrbuch fur ostdeutsche Volkskunde* 12 (1969), pp. 215–47.

by C.A. Moberg, a scholar describing the melismatic style of Scandinavian folk singers, that also serves as an uncannily accurate description of the examples of Russian-German melodies found in his article.¹³ Among the various characteristics cited by Moberg are the following: constant variation and modification of motive and rhythm, an emphasis on key consonant intervals as anchors for the melodies, nervous, quick, ornamented melodic movement, and an »irrational«, erratic rhythmic movement that defies precise transcription.

Suppan goes on to suggest that the history of music provides other examples of melismatic singing, the Alleluia of Gregorian chant being the most obvious example. Such melodies are found, he writes, »wherever notation had not stabilised melodic repertoires or where melodies and texts previously fixed in notation were returned to the freedom of an oral tradition.«¹⁴ Temperley begins his article on the Old Way of Singing with a similar statement: »In places where congregations are left to sing hymns without musical direction for long periods, a characteristic style of singing tends to develop.«¹⁵ Writing about a colony established by settlers from Bavaria, Schirmunski suggested that this kind of singing was most likely to develop in what he called a »Kulturelles Reliktgebiet«, or cultural backwater. In his experience it was the the poorer and less well educated colonists who sang in this way.¹⁶ The necessary and common ingredient leading to the development of melismatic singing styles of this kind thus seems to be the kind of prolonged isolation both Mennonite and German colonists experienced in Russia from the beginning of their sojourn until the end of the 19th century.

The emphasis here will be on hymns rather than folk songs, because Mennonites simply do not have the rich store of folk songs that can be

13 Ib. The passage cited is from Moberg, C.A.: *Studien zur schwedischen Volksmusik*. Upsala 1971, p. 196.

14 My translation of Suppan: *Das melismatische Singen der Wolga-Deutschen*, p. 240: »Überall dort, wo schriftliche Fixierung nicht die Normierung des Liedgutes bewirkte oder wo zunächst schriftlich festgelegte Texte und Melodien wieder in die Freiheit mündlicher Tradierung entlassen worden sind.«

15 Temperley: *The Old Way of Singing*, p. 511.

16 Shirmunski: *Alte und neue Volkslieder*, p. 3.

found in German communities.¹⁷ In addition, the work of Wiora and Suppan suggests that studying the way in which hymn tunes have been varied over long periods of time is particularly fruitful because in most cases such tunes are more likely than secular folk songs to have been notated at various times and in various places, providing examples to which other variants can be compared.¹⁸

I shall begin by presenting one melody from each tradition: the first section of the chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*¹⁹ in versions collected in Mexico in the 1950s and Alberta in the 1980s, (ex. 1) and *Blick in Gnaden auf uns nieder*, collected by Schünemann and presented as #39 of his collection (ex. 2). The line identified as CB in the Old Colony melody in ex. 1 represents the version of the chorale found in a *Choralbuch* published in 1865 by Heinrich Franz, a Russian-Mennonite teacher who had come to the Mennonite colonies from Prussia, in an attempt to reform the melismatic, »distorted« singing of the oral tradition found in Russian Mennonite churches of the mid-19th century.²⁰ The melody was originally printed in »Ziffern«, a notation system introduced into the Russian Mennonite colonies by Franz in which numerals represent the notes of the scale. JW is taken from a book of transcriptions of 86 hymn tunes made by an Old Colony song leader (»Vorsänger«) in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in the 1930s. These transcriptions are in »Ziffern«, with no rhythmic indications. They act as guides to memory rather than indications of what is actually to be sung, and are, in fact, not in general use among Old Colony »Vorsänger«, who continue to rely on their memories.

17 For a pioneering study of secular Mennonite oral traditions, see Klassen, Doreen Helen: *Singing Mennonite: Low German Songs among the Mennonites*. Winnipeg 1989.

18 Wiora, Walter: *Das produktive Umsingen deutscher Kirchenliedweisen in der Vielfalt europäischer Stile*. In: *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 2 (1956), pp. 47–63; and Suppan, Wolfgang: *Die Beachtung von ›Original‹ und ›Singmanier‹ im deutschsprachigen Volkslied*. In: *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung* 9 (1964), pp. 12–30.

19 Zahn, Johannes: *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*. 6 vols. Gütersloh 1889–93, n. 8.359.

20 *Choralbuch zum Gebrauch in den Mennonitischen Schulen und Kirchen in Kanada*. Leipzig 1865. Canadian reprint. Altona, Manitoba ¹³1976.

Bu is the transcription of a performance of the chorale heard by Charles Burkhart in Mexico in 1950. The transcription was done without the benefit of a tape recorder, and no attempt was made to indicate exact rhythmic values.²¹ WF is my transcription of a performance of the chorale from a cassette recording of a group of »Vorsänger« from Northern Alberta collected in the 1980s. The transcription attempts to provide a reasonably accurate record of rhythmic features.²²

A more detailed discussion of the notation and its history, the modality of the melodies, the larger patterns found in some of the 103 melodies available for examination, and the context in which the singing of the hymns takes place, can be found in *Old Colony Hymns and the Old Way of Singing*. Here I will make only a few brief observations. Note the remarkably close correspondence between the underlying structures of JW, Bu, and WF, in spite of the very different times and places in which they were written or collected. There are significant differences on the surface between Bu and WF, differences that could derive from three possible sources: a) different local performing traditions, b) the variations imposed on the melody by the individual singer, and c) the degree of detail attended to in the transcription. It seems clear, in fact, that the actual level of ornamentation and elaboration in Bu is greater than in WF. The fact that Bu was collected some 40 years earlier than WF demonstrates that the level of elaboration in such melodies cannot by itself indicate which came first,

21 Burkhart, Charles: *The Church Music of the Old Order Amish and Old Colony Mennonites*. In: *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27 (1953), pp. 34–54; *Music of the Old Colony Mennonites*. In: *Mennonite Life* 7 (1952), pp. 20–21, 47; and *The Music of the Old Order Amish and the Old Colony Mennonites: A Contemporary Monodic Practice*. MA thesis, Colorado College, 1952. The oral tradition of the Old Order Amish can be traced back to the mid-sixteenth century. See also Pullen Jackson, George: *The Strange Music of the Old Order Amish*. In: *The Musical Quarterly* 31 (1945), pp. 275–88; and Nettl, Bruno: *The Hymns of the Amish: An Example of Marginal Survival*. In: *Journal of American Folklore* 70 (1957), pp. 323–28.

22 It goes without saying that transcriptions of singing in traditions like these are much less likely to capture all the nuances of pitch and rhythm than they are in traditions governed by musical texts and more clearly articulated performing practices. My thanks to Abram Braun, Gerhard Ens, and William Friesen for making this music available to me.

even in melodies collected within the same region. Nevertheless, Bu and WF share virtually the same underlying melodic structure, showing that the memories of »Vorsänger« and their congregations have had a remarkable ability to maintain these structures over time, in spite of constant minute variations that are found in performances from Sunday to Sunday, from region to region, from year to year, and from decade to decade.

It is important to remember that the songs in the Schünemann collection were transcribed by ear and from phonograph recordings made by soldiers in a prisoner of war camp. It is hard to imagine that there will have been many song leaders among that group, or that Schünemann's informants will have been accustomed to singing together. In fact, Schünemann states that even when singers might not have wanted to sing alone, they were unable to sing together because of the differences in the tunes sung by men from different colonies.²³ The singers of the Old Colony Mennonite melodies were song leaders in the same congregation, men whose task in the church it is to preserve, teach and lead the congregation in the singing Sunday morning. Furthermore, they are reluctant to sing alone, preferring to simulate the dynamics of a group performance as much as possible even in a private recording session. It is probable that the group performance does two things: singers help each other to remember the long, rhythmically amorphous melodies, and this in turn serves to control the rate and degree of variation.²⁴ This is not to suggest that variation is frowned upon. It is accepted mostly without comment, except, perhaps, when members of different congregations experience difficulties in singing together, but it does help to explain why Old Colony Mennonite melodies are not sung out of shape even more than might be expected.

The Old Colony versions of *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* follow the shape of the original melody quite closely. (The melodic fragments under square brackets at the end of each phrase are sung by the »Vorsänger« alone in order to lead the congregation into the next phrase.) This is true of

23 Schünemann: *Das Lied der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland*, p. x.

24 See Rubin, David C.: *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes*. New York, Oxford 1995, for a comprehensive discussion of current research into the psychological processes of oral traditions.

only about half of the 86 transcriptions in JW; that is to say, in at least half of the melodies melodic accretions, substitutions, etc., have caused the original melodic structure to be obscured or to disappear altogether. The melodic movement consists mostly of passing tones, anticipations and neighbour tones filling in melodic gaps and decorating individual notes. The first measure of the third phrase contains one of the few really distinctive formulas to be found in Old Colony hymns. This pattern occurs when moving from the fifth degree of the scale to the sixth, or from sol to la. Compare the first measure of the last phrase of *Was Gott thut* below.

According to Schünemann, melody #39 of his collection shown in ex. 2 originated among the Brethren churches of Russia. The opening phrase could be a decorated version of the first phrase of the chorale by Joachim Neander, sung to the texts *Tut mir auf die schöne Pforte* and *Unser Herrscher*²⁵. Like the Old Colony melodies, the main notes of the tune are decorated with passing tones, complete and incomplete neighbouring tones, and anticipations. Unlike the Old Colony versions, the main melodic notes are easily recognised and the level of ornamentation is not nearly as high. In fact, the melody is more like another transcription of melismatic hymn singing in 19th-century Lutheran congregations provided by Johann Ernst Häuser in the appendix to his treatise on Lutheran church music in the early 19th century ex. 3.²⁶

The reference to Häuser's treatise provides an opportunity to consider the historical sources of this kind of singing, or at least the conditions under which it might have arisen. Because Mennonites living in Prussia exchanged the Dutch hymnals they had used until after 1750 for the hymns of their Lutheran neighbours just before leaving for settlements along the Dniepr River in Ukraine in 1788 and 1789, the relationship of Old Colony Mennonite hymnody to the hymn singing traditions of Lutheran German congregations in Prussia and Germany in the late 18th century is

25 Zahn: *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*, n. 3.735a.

26 Häuser, Johann Ernst: *Geschichte des christlichen, insbesondere des evangelischen Kirchengesanges und der Kirchenmusik von Entstehung des Christenthums an, bis auf unsere Zeit; nebst Andeutungen und Vorschlägen zur Verbesserung des musikalischen Teiles des evangelischen Cultus; Ein historisch-ästhetischer Versuch*. Quedlinburg, Leipzig 1834.

an obvious starting point. I have examined the citations of melismatic hymn singing in two 19th-century treatises by Bernhard Natorp and Friedrich Kessler on Lutheran church music in Lutheran congregations in Prussia and Germany elsewhere.²⁷ Indirectly through the criticisms levelled by the two authors at the singing of Lutheran congregations of the time, and directly through their transcriptions of what they called »verschnörkelte« (distorted) melodies, it is possible to demonstrate that a melismatic style of singing chorales must have existed in Lutheran churches at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Mennonites in all likelihood took over this style of singing just before leaving for Russia, or it might be more accurate to say that the same conditions that led to melismatic hymn singing in Lutheran churches also existed in Mennonite churches of the time.

Häuser's treatise of 1834 provides further evidence of the state of congregational singing in the Lutheran churches from which many Germans leaving for Russia at the turn of the 19th century must have come. The work begins with a history of church music, followed by an account of the reforms taking place in the churches of Germany at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. He pays particular tribute to the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm III, and his efforts to improve the music of the church in his domain in the first decades of the 19th century.²⁸ The final section of the book provides specific instructions on how the musical efforts

27 Kessler, Friedrich: *Der musikalische Kirchendienst: Ein Wort für alle denen die Beförderung des Cultus am Herzen liegt; insbesondere für Organisten und Prediger*. Iserlohn 1832; and Natorp, Bernhard: *Über den Gesang in den Kirchen der Protestanten. Ein Beytrag zu den Vorarbeiten der Synoden für die Veredlung der Liturgie*. Essen, Duisburg 1817, discussed in Berg: *Old Colony Mennonite Hymns*, pp. 106–8. Natorp, born in 1774, was a theologian and pastor, participated vigorously in the reforms of church music taking place at the turn of the century, and became active in educational reform after 1804. Kessler was not as prominent, but was a co-author with Natorp of a book on church music.

28 See Blankenburg, Walter: *Church Music in Reformed Europe*. In: *Protestant Church Music: A History*. Ed. by Friedrich Blume. London 1975, pp. 551f., for a brief account of these reforms. Although Friedrich Wilhelm III is generally described as weak and vacillating, he was surrounded by able administrators like Wilhelm Humboldt and Heinrich Stein, who introduced a number of political and educational reforms.

of organists, song leaders, and congregations might be improved. Like Kessler and Natorp, Häuser deplores the state of congregational singing in many churches, using similar adjectives – bawling, decorating, flourishes, slow and uncertain – in describing what needs to be improved. He has no patience with the departures from the purity of the original chorale tune, citing the many passing tones, mordents, and grace notes that infest congregational singing, all of which are to be purged through the proper education of organists, song leaders and members of the congregation themselves.

Of particular interest is his explanation of what he calls the tastelessly disfigured »geschmacklos entstellte« melody in ex. 3.²⁹ Such distortions arise, according to Häuser, from 1) a lack of knowledge of the simple, original melody, 2) the absence of proper attention to such mistakes in the earliest stages of instruction in singing, 3) the lack of taste of less well educated congregations, 4) the tendency of people to imitate what they hear, even if it is wrong, and 5) the dragging, slow tempo that encourages people to introduce variations in order to give more life to the music. He suggests several ways to cure this problem: 1) appropriate instruction in singing in the schools, 2) simple performances of the chorales by organists and song leaders, 3) having school children and song leaders demonstrate the proper singing of the melodies, 4) encouraging the use of quicker tempos, and 5) continued instruction and admonition.

One final observation can be made on the basis of Häuser's descriptions of the defects of Lutheran church music before continuing the examination of Old Colony and Russian German melodies. His criticisms are similar to those made by church music reformers in other places and at other times. His perspective is that of the musically literate, historically aware musician who views adherence to the original creations of composers as one of the important duties of the conscientious church musician. Furthermore, like other critics of this kind of singing, Häuser is offended by the sounds he heard in the congregations he visited. In *Old Colony Mennonite Hymns and the Old Way of Singing* I argued that a comparison of Old Colony Mennonite hymns and singing styles with manifestations of similar styles of

29 Häuser: *Geschichte des christlichen, insbesondere des evangelischen Kirchengesanges*, pp. 322f.

melodic evolution and singing styles in English parish churches, the New England colonies, and Old Baptist churches of the Southern United States suggests that this style, including the vocal quality of the singing, represents an elemental form of music making in societies where, to return to Suppan's statement, »notation had not stabilised melodic repertoires or where melodies and texts previously fixed in notation were returned to the freedom of an oral tradition.«³⁰

Häuser's caustic comments notwithstanding, the singing of the Germans from Russia as reported by Schünemann represents one more piece of evidence in support of this more positive view of such traditions. Schünemann describes an intense, penetrating, drawn out manner of singing in which beauty of tone and regularity of rhythm are not qualities that the singers seem to be aware of or interested in.³¹ His words accurately describe the singing of the Old Colony Mennonites as well. He attributes some of these qualities to the fact that Germans in Russia may have absorbed them from their Russian neighbours; I am inclined to agree with Schirmunski, Witrock, and Suppan when they reject this idea. The Old Colony Mennonites have been removed from Russian influences for more than a century now and still sing in this way, suggesting that cultural or geographical boundaries do not necessarily determine where this kind of singing will occur.

The melodic styles of the two groups can be compared more easily in ex. 4. The melody is *Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan*³². The Old Colony version follows the original chorale structure quite closely, with the exception of the opening measure. Here the opening interval of a fourth in the chorale is retained but transposed upward to place the opening within the more constricted melodic range normally found in the Old Colony melodies. The repetition of the first section occurs more or less without change, although very small variations may occur. In measures five and nine the less

30 On the evidence for this style in the United States see Wicks, Sammie Ann: *A belated salute to the »old way« of »snaking« the voice on its (ca) 345th birthday*. In: *Popular Music* 8 (1989), pp. 59–96.

31 Schünemann: *Das Lied der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland*, pp. 40, 44.

32 Zahn: *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*, n. 5.629.

stable sixth degree of the scale (la) is replaced by the fifth (sol), with the A appearing as a decorative tone. Two noteworthy characteristics of the second section are the use of the formula decorating the movement from sol to la referred to in ex. 1, and in connection with that the use of virtually the same notes in the last phrase as were found in ex. 1. The sixth degree of the scale is given its due by means of the formulaic gesture, but with considerable effort and preparation. While the use of formulas is not common, when confronted with the same pattern in the original chorale Old Colony »Vorsänger« will occasionally respond with a standard solution.

The Schünemann version, like the ones in ex. 2 and 3, is much less ornate than the Old Colony version. In this case the melody deviates considerably from the original melody, mostly, it seems clear, because it has been used to convey a text with a very different syllabic structure. Old Colony singers use the same melody for several different texts, but the texts will invariably have the same syllabic structure. The Old Colony text has this syllabic structure: 8-7-4-4-7-7; the Schünemann melody has 11-11-4-4-11. This accounts for the elision of a substantial portion of the middle of the chorale and the extension and elaboration at the end of the first phrase, the beginning of the second, and again at the beginning of the last phrase. It is also clear, however, that the singer's memory of the original melody has weakened. Note that the repetition of the two short phrases beginning the second section occurs at the same pitch level. In both the chorale and the Old Colony version the second phrase is repeated one step lower. Schünemann's singer also had characteristic ways of responding to certain melodic patterns: the descending lower tetrachord of the scale is decorated by a series of incomplete neighbouring tones. This same pattern occurs on scale steps 321 at the end of ex. 4.

A melody that comes closer to the more amorphous rhythmic and melodic patterns of the Old Colonists can be found in Schünemann #422, ex. 5. This is a song growing out of the period after 1874 when colonists lost their exemption from military service.³³ The text of the first verse is as follows:

33 Long: *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, pp. 33–40. See Berg, Wesley: *Bearing Arms for the Tsar: The Songs of the Germans in Russia*. In: *Journal of Mennonite Stud-*

Wesley Berg

Jetzt fangen an die schwere Stunden,
die Trübsal bricht mit Macht herein.
Der Vater muss den Schmerz erdulden,
der Sohn muss in den Krieg hinein.
Lasst uns alle insgemein
recht herzlich um Vergebung schrein.

Now begin the awful hours,
Affliction bears down mightily.
The father must endure suffering,
His son must go to war.
Let us all with one voice
Cry out for forgiveness.

The melody is that of the chorale *Mir ist Erbarmung widerfahren*³⁴. The only significant structural change is the elimination of the repetition of the last phrase. Schünemann imposed a metric pattern on the transcription, but added a note that the singing was rhythmically free with many deviations and variations. It is likely therefore that the actual performance did not fit as comfortably into quadruple meter as the transcription suggests, and that the difference between it and the triple meter chorale is even greater. The melody also contains more notes than some of the others. Could it be that this melody, detached from its home in the church, was more amenable to variation than the melodies that remained in the church? The less ornate state of some chorale melodies with religious texts presented by Schünemann suggests that this may be so, at least in the Russian German communities he was studying.

Finally, in ex. 6 it is possible to compare five versions of *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*. From top to bottom we see CB, JW, a version given by Natorp, a version transcribed from a recorded version sung by Old Colony Mennonite singers, and the version given as #421 by Schünemann, another rendition of *Jetzt fangen an die Schreckensstunden*, this time of just the first four lines.³⁵ The original chorale is in A minor. The Natorp version is mostly in A minor, except for the F# at the end of the first phrase, at which point it resembles the Old Colony version. The Old Colony version has a scale with the structure of a dorian mode transposed in this case to A. This tendency to revert to modal scale structures, if

ies 17 (1999), pp. 178–93, for a study of the texts of Russian German soldier songs from the Crimean War to the First World War.

34 Zahn: *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder*, n. 2.907.

35 The transcription by Natorp of a melody he heard sung in an early 19th-century Lutheran church is found in Natorp: *Über den Gesang in den Kirchen der Protestanten*.

revert is the correct word to use to describe the phenomenon, is found only in the Old Colony melodies. The melodies of the Germans from Russia, while frequently containing the melismatic flourishes and the elisions and expansions that can also be found in the Old Colony melodies, almost invariably retain the scale structure of the original melody. Of the 86 melodies in JW, the book of Old Colony Mennonite transcriptions, on the other hand, 15 end on 2, or »re« rather than the 6, or »la« of a minor scale, while 14 chorales that end on the 1 of a major scale, are transformed into dorian, ending on 2, or »re«, by the Old Colony singers.

The most obvious difference between the Schünemann example and all of the others is the fact that a number of phrases have been eliminated in the Volga German version. Here again the difference in the length of the text is a partial answer. The original text has a syllabic structure of 989888; the Russian German version 9898. This is clearly a case of a singer using a pre-existing melody as a vehicle for a new text, ruthlessly excising all elements that did not fit. Schünemann accounts for this and many of the other differences in the repertoire he was examining in this way.

It was its removal from the church and from congregational singing that led to transformations and to the inclusion of performance mannerisms that distanced it more and more from the original. One can see two stages in the development of the songs of the colonists, the appropriation of a chorale melody in its original form, and the subsequent assimilation of the melody into the body of folk art, with mannerisms characteristic of the colonists and with variations that insert new motives into the gaps that developed over time.³⁶

On the evidence presented in the Schünemann collection, the melismatic nature of hymn tunes among the Germans from Russia is not as fully de-

36 »Erst ihre Ablösung von Kirche und gemeinsamem Gesang führte zu Umbildungen und zur Einführung von Vortragsmanieren, die sich immer weiter von der Quelle entfernten. Man sieht zwei Entwicklungsstufen des kolonistischen Liedes beieinander: die Übernahme einer Choralmelodie, wie sie vom Textdichter angegeben wurde, und die Aufnahme des Liedes im Volksgut mit kolonistischen Manieren und mit Veränderungen, die für verlorene Einzelheiten neue Motive einschalten« (p. 116).

veloped as in the Old Colony repertoire. The examination of hundreds of transcriptions of Russian German melodies in the collection of the Deutsches Volkslied Archiv and in a variety of published collections failed to turn up any melodies as densely and uniformly melismatic as those of the Old Colony Mennonites.³⁷ While both melodic styles originated in isolated communities, it may also be that the Lutheran church of the Germans, weak though its educational programs may have been in the remote regions of the Volga River, was still able to enforce a larger measure of control over the tendency to change the sacred hymn tunes of the church. Although the colonies suffered from a severe and chronic shortage of pastors, they had developed a common hymnal as early as 1816.³⁸ In 1819 the Russian government attempted to eliminate the differences between Lutheran and Reformed congregations by placing all Volga German Protestant parishes under a Protestant Consistory located in Saratov, which was incorporated into the Moscow Lutheran Consistory in 1832.³⁹ The shortage of pastors may also have served at least to some extent to mitigate their isolation; the local school teacher performed most of the duties of a pastor but the parish was visited by an ordained minister on a regular rotation, providing some links between congregations in the region.

However remote the Moscow headquarters may have been, and however rare the visits of often poorly trained pastors may have been, the possibility for some measure of control and periodic reminders of the original shape of the chorale tunes seems more likely than in the case of Old Colony Mennonite congregations, which were not part of a larger organisation that could serve as a point of reference, provide educated pastors and produce periodic hymnals in the way that more highly structured churches can. This seems to be implied in the quotation from Schünemann above. The only guide for Old Colony singers is the memory of the last performance. The Lutheran church was also more likely to permit or even encour-

37 See, f.ex., Scheierling, Konrad: *Geistliche Lieder der Deutschen aus Südosteuropa*. Kludebach 1987.

38 Koch, Fred C.: *The Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas. From 1763 to the Present* University Park (Pennsylvania State University Press) 1977, p. 113.

39 Long: *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, p. 45.

age the use of organs, whereas musical instruments were not allowed at all in Old Colony Mennonite services. The presence of an instrument in a congregation, while not an absolute impediment to the development of melismatic singing, would certainly act as a moderating influence.

It could be argued that the controlling factors that may have prevented the hymn tunes of the Germans from Russia from being varied out of recognition would not have been present in the secular repertoire. While there are some folksongs that exhibit some exuberant melismatic flourishes (Schünemann #396 p. 363), in general the secular songs cited by Schünemann and Suppan in *Untersuchungen zum Lied-Repertoire des Russland-deutschen Georg Sänger aus Leitchling an der Wolga* are not more ornate than their sacred counterparts. In one of his most elaborate comparisons Schünemann presents twelve versions of the German folksong *O Strassburg, o Strassburg, du wunderschöne Stadt* from various colonies in Russia.⁴⁰ They range from renditions fairly close to the printed version to renditions that bear very little resemblance to the original. Even in the latter instances, however, there tend to be only two-note melismas for syllables that have been decorated in this way, with not every note carrying a melisma. This is also true for the examples cited by Suppan in his transcriptions of Georg Sänger's songs.

Old Colony melodies, on the other hand, usually have a minimum of four and as many as six or seven notes in each melisma, with most syllables carrying a melisma. As a result, they have as many as two or three times as many notes as the equivalent Russian German melodies. The rich melismas of Old Colony singing, when coupled with the coherence and uniform density of the Old Colony Mennonite repertoire from congregation to congregation and across decades and continents, are remarkable. The coherence and uniform density across all of the examples available for analysis may reflect the fact that the Old Colony Mennonite community, while far flung, is a small one, with many kinship links that foster visits even when relatives are a continent away. There has also been significant emigration back and forth from Mexico, Belize and Paraguay to Canada over the years, making it likely that tunes will have been shared even though local

40 Schünemann: *Das Lied der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland*, pp. 135–140.

differences often interfere with fluent congregational singing when members from different groups worship together. It must also surely reflect the strict social controls enforcing a traditional way of life in closed communities that are also apparent in other aspects of Old Colony society.⁴¹ But it is not as easy to suggest reasons for the lavish and pervasive melismas that obscure the original melodic structure in a way that simply does not occur in the Russian German melodies. The comparison with the Russian German repertoire has served to draw attention to this feature and some of the differences in the organization of religious life in the two communities hint at an explanation, but a more complete understanding will require further research.

41 Redekop, Calvin: *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life*. Baltimore 1969.