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**An “Invented Tradition” for an “Imagined Community”:  
Male Choral Singing in Nineteenth-Century Germany\***

**Abstract**

While secular choral singing assumed great importance in the musical life of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, the repertory it gave rise to is all but ignored in modern music history textbooks. No doubt, this omission is primarily due to the genre’s strong political associations: many of the overtly nationalistic texts have inevitably seemed inappropriate for most post-1945 musicologists. By contrast, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of an impressive series of works on the topic, all of which drew inspiration from Otto Elben’s pioneering *Der volksthümliche deutsche Männergesang: seine Geschichte, seine gesellschaftliche und nationale Bedeutung* (1855; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1887). As Elben’s subtitle to some extent foreshadowed, these authors sought to provide the genre with a history that would confirm its “national significance”: the obvious convivial precedents are more or less ignored; on the other hand, possible connections to earlier “national” music are given great emphasis. Using excerpts from Benedict Widmann’s *Die kunsthistorische Entwicklung des Männerchors in drei Vorlesungen dargestellt* (1884) as illustration, I propose to read these “myths of origin” in the light of modernist analyses of nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s interpretation of the nation as an “imagined community” sheds light on the steadily rising popularity of the *Gesangvereine* in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, while Eric Hobsbawm’s work illuminates how the creation of a consistently elevated and “authentically German” prehistory proved useful in legitimizing an essentially “invented tradition.”

**Key words**

“imagined community”, “invented tradition”, *Männergesangvereine*, music historiography, nationalism, *Volk*, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Otto Elben, Benedikt Widmann

Although male choral singing played a uniquely important cultural and political role in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, its history and repertory have mostly been neglected by musicologists. This omission comes as little surprise: the traditional biases of the discipline favored the (assumed) aesthetic abstractness of instrumental forms – the so-called absolute *Musik* – at the expense of vocal genres, especially those with an overtly political function. And male choral singing had to suffer the most under this intellectual climate, since German nationalism – whose important vehicle it undoubtedly became in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – was effectively and even retrospectively discredited by Nazism, and became an altogether sensitive topic after World War II. Due to the relative lack of more recent literature, the interested reader still has to turn to those

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monographs that were dedicated to the genre in its lifetime, so to speak, from Otto Elben's 1855 *Der volksthümliche deutsche Männergesang, seine Geschichte, seine gesellschaftliche und nationale Bedeutung*<sup>1</sup> up to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Needless to say, the narratives presented in these works must be taken with a good deal of salt: to write the history of a yet living cultural phenomenon has as a rule more to do with legitimizing (or discrediting) the phenomenon itself than with aiming at an 'objective survey' of the historical facts. In what follows I propose to read these texts as documents that may reveal the self-perception of the male choir movement; my goal is not to scrupulously point out the (numerous) factual errors, but to adumbrate the grand narrative the authors imply, and to understand its relationship to the genre's social and national significance. In doing so, I shall refer to two basic concepts that have proven of great use in the study of nationalism in general: the "imagined community," and the "invented tradition."

The first term was coined by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, first published in 1983.<sup>2</sup> As the author explains in the Introduction, the nation could be defined as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>3</sup> The word "community" hardly needs much explanation, although Anderson emphasizes that, for him, this word implies "a deep, horizontal comradeship." As regards limitedness and sovereignty, the first suggests that all nations have "finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations," while the second results from the fact that "the concept [of nation] was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm." But the crucial word in Anderson's definition is "imagined": the nation "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." *Imagining* the nation, however, does not necessarily equal *fabricating* something unreal: "In fact all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."

The other useful term was introduced by Eric Hobsbawm, incidentally also in 1983, in the preface of *The Invention of Tradition*, a collection of essays co-edited with Terence Ranger.<sup>4</sup> As Hobsbawm suggests, "'traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in

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<sup>1</sup> Tübingen, Laupp, 1855. Second, amended edition published as *Der volksthümliche deutsche Männergesang: Geschichte und Stellung im Leben der Nation*, Tübingen, Laupp, 1887; also available in facsimile: Wolfenbüttel, Mösel, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> I had access to a revised and extended edition: Philipines, Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2003.

<sup>3</sup> All the quotations in this paragraph come from: *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

origin and sometimes invented.”<sup>5</sup> Whether the “tradition” is “invented” in the strict sense (by way of conscious construction and institutionalization) or its emergence seems more spontaneous (but still occurs in a brief and datable period) is of lesser importance for him; the crucial question is how the new tradition functions, once established: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”

As is evident, the two concepts of Anderson and Hobsbawm to some extent complement each other. An “invented tradition” is able to provide the members of an “imagined community” with common cultural experiences – and with that, the necessary feeling of emotional and intellectual community – even if they never meet personally. In addition, by “automatically imply[ing] continuity with the past,” it forges a link to long-dead members of the same community, and, by extension, even suggests that the ritual practice in question will exist in the future as well (together with the community itself, of course). With these points in mind, we may now return to our original topic, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historiography of male choral singing, and examine it as a means of creating an “invented tradition” for an “imagined community.”

Due to space constraints, it would be hopeless to survey here the relevant literature as a whole. So, let me choose but one characteristic example, *Die kunsthistorische Entwicklung des Männerchors in drei Vorlesungen dargestellt* by Benedikt Widmann.<sup>6</sup> As the subtitle confirms, this work originated as a series of three public lectures commissioned in 1884 by the Wilhelm-Augusta-Stiftung in Frankfurt am Main, an organization for the benefit of children of schoolteachers in poverty. The inspiration came from August Wilhelm Ambros’s *Geschichte der Musik*; his idea of ‘historical’ concerts – “which will become for the friend of music what picture galleries are for the friend of art”<sup>7</sup> – triggered Widmann to present the history of male choral music with sounding illustrations as performed by the choir of the Frankfurt teacher’s union. As the occasion suggests, Widmann’s work was not intended for a professional audience, and is arguably not the most scholarly contribution to the historiography of the male choral movement. However, it is precisely this popularizing tendency that renders his interpretation more characteristic of the ‘received wisdom’ of the period, and his effort to place the genre in the context of the whole of music history provides a unique insight into the wishful thinking – or

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<sup>5</sup> Both quotations in this paragraph are from: *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Leipzig, Merseburger, 1884.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. 1, Breslau, Leuckart, 1862, X.

indeed grand-scale myth-making – that surrounded the male choral movement throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In his opening lecture, Widmann first examines the ancient origins of male choral singing. Although he admits that this performing practice assumed a new form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he insists that, “if we ignore the polyphony of the song, the male choir can be called as old as vocal music itself.” (p6)<sup>8</sup> In support of this thesis, Widmann quotes Tacit, who described how the ancient German warriors “filled the clefts of the valleys and the echoing hills with cheery singing or wild clamor the night before the battle.” (p7) The acceptance of Christianity, however, brought further progress with the introduction of plainchant, and the Germans were especially quick to respond to this new inspiration: Charlemagne was instrumental in spreading the Gregorian repertory throughout Inner Germany, St. Gallen soon developed one of the best singing schools of the time, and (as Widmann believes) Notker laid down the foundation of *Liedform* in his sequentias. Later “Gregorian chant was transformed more artfully in the Minnesang and the Meistersang.” (p8–9) In general the Minnesänger receive relatively little attention; Widmann even notes somewhat disapprovingly (and indeed surprisingly) that “the Minnesang took the place of the folksong in the courts.” (p10) The Meistersänger seem more important for him, especially since the last four members of a guild in Ulm remained active until 1839, thus creating a clear chronological link to the ‘true’ male choral movement. Widmann’s main goal, however, is to point out the tendency suggested by all the above:

Our contemplation led us gradually from the higher regions of the courtly and chivalric world down to the craftsmen and the people from the lower classes of the *Volk*. But we have only seen the decline of the *old* art; now we want to follow the rise of the *new* by mixing ourselves more with these lower classes. For the true folksong originated with them. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries it woke up again. (p13)

This is a crucial turning point, since the creation and transmission of folksong presents (at least for Widmann) a paradigm unknown to ‘higher’ art music:

What the individual feels, flows out in the moment of genesis as song; others sing it after him, perhaps changing as well what does not please them. Its later, great dissemination is thanks to its peculiar nature, through which it differs substantially from the art song. In

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<sup>8</sup> In the interest of space, quotations from Widmann’s book are followed by the respective page numbers (in brackets) in the main text.

his lectures given in 1864 about German literature, the late Professor Creizenach demanded of the true folksong: concise form, quick transitions, and singability. To these characteristics one could also add: naivety, and objectivity. (p14)

This naivety also determines the performance of these melodies, since “the *Volk* rarely sings strictly in meter; it abandons itself completely to the power of its feelings.” (p16) But this characteristic of recent performances is somewhat misleading: the golden age that created these melodies is gone forever – there is no naive *Volk* any more that could create with such spontaneity. Still, “those, whose ears have not yet been completely spoiled” (p18) can enjoy these melodies even today.

In view of this optimistic statement, it is of course a bit ironic that Widmann presents an example from the *Lochaimer Liederbuch* as “harmonized in simple triads” (p20) – apparently, he did not dare hope that any member of his audience would have had ears unspoiled enough to enjoy the folksong unaccompanied. To somewhat justify this paradox, however, Widmann notes that harmony has not developed from the counterpoint of high art music, “it has rather been brought up to full autonomy as a child of folksong.” (p25) In this sense, polyphony is a natural outgrowth of the melody itself – no wonder that even “a wholly uneducated *Naturmensch*, unaware of the symphonic concordances, tries to sing and compose a bass to the folksong.” (p26) In this light, it might seem logical that the peak of the evolution of folksong in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries coincides with the highpoint of counterpoint, since (as a quotation from Ambros explains)

the taking over of fresh, lively folk melodies into the artificial counterpoint had an extraordinarily fortunate influence on the latter. It brought a *volkstümliches* element of irrepressible life power, a piece of folk life into these works, which could easily have remained dead calculation examples otherwise. Thus, even the counterpoint of this period sprouted from sturdy soil; it was, similarly to the poetry, painting, and architecture of the time, essentially *national*; it came *from* the *Volk*, and was intended *for* the *Volk*. Understandably, the contrapuntal countervoices, [these] streaming melodies were also conceived in the spirit of the basic melody, often as its imitations. Had the masters invented their *themes* freely as well, they would by all means have stood as *strangers* before the *Volk*; but this way the *Volk* recognized in these works its very own property, which Art had borrowed, in order to return it enriched, ennobled, and awakened to a

higher spiritual life. The Gregorian chant and the folksong were secure leaders, and they saved Art from the danger of loosing itself to the aimless and groundless.<sup>9</sup> (p25)

This golden age of counterpoint was created first of all in the Netherlands, which (as Widmann implies) somehow deserved its leading role in music history due to the people's "honorable morals, fresh life power, manly proficiency and solid education." (p27) Orlando Lasso's secular music, which is "full of temper and powerful humor," is typical of the period, and he was also a master of "treating a simple motive of a folk melody highly interestingly in counterpoint." (p28) Already around 1500, however, several German composers appeared on the stage as well, producing "an almost inestimable mass of polyphonic German lieder, truly German in character, whose admirable setting rivaled the best Netherlands examples." (p30) The leading master here is Hans Leo Hassler: his works preserve the atmosphere of folksong, but at the same time strive for a more concise form, as well as a more sensitive interpretation of the text. In conclusion of his first chapter, Widmann praises Palestrina's 'angelic' style, though he does not keep it secret that his real sympathy lies with Lasso's music, which "strikes deeper, darker tones; develops a more energetic force, [and] contours of the greatest liveliness." (p36)

Before turning to Widmann's second chapter, a short review of the above may be in place. Given that, as he himself admits, the German male choir movement is an essentially 19<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon, all the pre-1600 history can hardly be taken as relevant precedents. However, as Hobsbawm notes, many invented traditions "were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity."<sup>10</sup> For Widmann, this almost mythical past hinges on three important factors: any kind of folksong, anything 'German,' and any music sung exclusively by men is considered as foreshadowing the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Männergesangvereine*. Since the folksong is considered as 'naive' and 'spontaneous,' the author seems to see the several styles and genres as developing towards a final point: the rise of folksong (and with it: the rise of the *Volk* itself) is the result of an unconscious development, and the culmination of this process – apparently the inevitable goal of history – is reached only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (a distinctly Hegelian idea). If so, the composers who infuse art music with the spirit of folksong are the true movers of history – and the above account seems to suggest that they all happened to be German, or at least Flemish. (Anderson would of course object that the community between the Germanic warriors described by Tacit and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German burgher is questionable, but for Widmann the connection

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<sup>9</sup> August Wilhelm Ambros, *Geschichte der Musik*, Vol. 2, Breslau, Leuckart, 1864, 286.

<sup>10</sup> Hobsbawm, 7 (cf. note 4).

seemed obvious.) Lasso, then, who was born in the Netherlands, but reached the peak of his career in Munich, effectively symbolizes a historic shift of emphasis, and in this light Widmann's enthusiastic characterization of the prospering Netherlands may easily be read as foreshadowing the later Germany. Indeed, the latter could well have become a paradise of music even earlier, "but the free, happy life that connected the Belgian cities was missing; already at that time, separatism rested on Germany like a curse." (29) The implication is evident: in order to be able to fulfill their mission in the history of music, the Germans first had to lay the foundation of their own unified empire.

But we should not run that far ahead. The second chapter discusses (as its title describes) "the development of the newer art song in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries" with special emphasis on the madrigal. Unsurprisingly, for Widmann this new genre is but another field to discover the folksy element: the texts are "often 'low' and unglossed," while the music exhibits an "expressive understandability," in part because "one invented the motives freely, or borrowed them from folksong." (p41) In fact, several of Gastoldi's extremely popular pieces appear to present a sort of proto-lied with their homophony and the "short melodic phrases, already clearly divided into antecedent and consequent," thus creating a "transparent period structure." (p43)

The years around 1600 undoubtedly mark an important change, and the author reads the whole of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a mere episode in the history of music; as a typical transitory period that is lacking in great masters, but establishes a series of new forms. The most important of these is of course opera, which, however, fell into a deep crisis by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: "the princes only demanded Italian melodies and trills," "everything depended on the momentary pleasure; rules, basic principles, laws fell into oblivion just as peaceful, inner joy; only astonishment and enrapturement mattered." (p50) But then, "the German Johann [sic] Christoph von Gluck appeared," who saved opera from the (equally damaging) Italian and aristocratic influences, and even introduced the male chorus into the genre. Inspired by this innovation, several later masters (like Mozart in *The Magic Flute*, or Beethoven in *Fidelio*) "perfected their operas" (p51) by using similar male choirs – in fact, Widmann retrospectively wonders how Handel (who was otherwise so exemplary in coupling "inexhaustible artistry and simple folksy understandability" [p54]) could do without such choruses at all.

As regards true male quartets, independent of opera, the first of these were published by Michael Haydn, whose part-songs remain exemplary in their "fresh, sensually exciting atmosphere lifted by warm pulses of life." (p56) Leonhard von Call's works are also "pleasing, easy, jaunty, and folksy" (p57); however, the work of both composers suffered from a lack of "truly poetic, inviting lyrics," (p58) which preserved it for the 19<sup>th</sup> century to fulfill the promise

of Haydn. For Widmann, this is just another example of how history proceeds not by crossing clear boundaries, but rather by moving through “circles whose peripheries overlap. [...] The higher circle does not exclude the lower, but includes it, just as the leaves do not disown the trunk and the radix from which they sprang.” (p59–60) This biological simile is revealing: the folksong is seen as a kind of seed here, planted at least as early as the Middle Ages, and from then on it was merely a question of patience to be able to diagnose its gradual growth, and eventually its full bloom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The last stage of this evolution, however, brings fulfillment not merely on the ‘biological,’ but also on the artistic level, since “now a more artful form became necessary for the lieder of the *Volk* as well, and from this need the *volkstümliches* lied came into being,” which “stands in the middle between the folksong proper and the art song”: “it has its rounded, sleek form from the latter; the universality, the accessibility and understandability of its content from the former.” (p60–61)

The final pages of the second chapter investigate the Berlin Lied School, which was instrumental in creating this new, noblest form of the folksong. And Chapter 3 traces the above trend further in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the rise of polyphonic male choral singing as an independent genre. The key figure is the Swiss Hans Georg Nägeli, who provided the first theory of male choirs by “methodizing the organic–manly and the characteristic–manful for the mechanical act of singing, as well as for the aesthetic effect of vocal art.” (p71) To be sure, Zelter’s Berlin Liedertafel (founded in 1808/9) is slightly older than Nägeli’s Zurich male choir; nevertheless, Zelter’s initiative remained restricted to an ‘aristocratically’ small number of creative individuals, whereas Nägeli’s more ‘democratic’ model successfully spread the choral movement throughout the German-speaking lands. Still, a crucial transformation occurred in Germany, where “in the sad time of abasement noble men found each other in the consolation of singing [...] and were enthused for the uprising against the enemy of the fatherland.” (p75) Thus, in Carl Maria von Weber’s “Lyre and Sword” cycle (to texts by the poet–martyr Theodor Körner) “the German *Volk* finds the final chord [*Ausklang*] of a rich, idiosyncratic feeling for which he knew no word before,” and now “Germany’s *feeling* and Weber’s *songs* are inconceivable without each other.” (p78–79) Unfortunately, in contrast to this forceful style, many more recent compositions tend towards “sentimental mawkishness and exaggerated affectation”; this damaging direction can only be countered by returning to the true basis of the genre, to “an invincible source of forever fresh life, of natural, healthy vigor in the folksong.” (p83) And it is not simply the male chorus that depends on the folksong, but the other way round as well, since

the folksong turned into an art-form proper precisely in the German male quartet. Indeed, one can hardly think of German folksong otherwise than in the form of the male quartet. This phenomenon stands alone in the whole history of art. But therein lies the key to the wonder and the vast influence that four-part male singing exerts in our time. (p84)

With this statement – or rather declaration of love – Widmann arguably locates the long-awaited end of music history. Even earlier he suggested that “the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought music in general, with that also singing, and finally the male choir to the perfection that we enjoy today” (p9); now it becomes clear that this highpoint is essentially the apotheosis of folksong that has eventually found its proper vehicle in a choir consisting of four male voices. In this light, the male choir movement – its fairly recent origins notwithstanding – appears as legitimate heir to over a thousand years of music history. Rather than an “invention,” it pretends to be a “culmination” of a tradition as old as the *Volk* itself. Whether this *Volk* is specifically German is left open: it seems equally possible that the Germans’ historic mission was to stand up for all the different peoples by bringing folksong to its highest artistic form.

The rest of Widmann’s book is somewhat frustrating: having reached the long-desired goal, his narrative seems to fall apart. To mention those composers and scholars who did much for the popularization of folksongs (like Friedrich Silcher, Ludwig Erk, or Magnus Böhme) is yet a logical continuation, but the last pages provide the reader with little more than a list of composers’ names with an annotation after each, evaluating their respective significance. In assessing this significance, however, the author faces an irresolvable paradox: the composers closely associated with the male quartet are not the ones who determined the history of music (at least as their contemporaries conceived of it). The fact that the name of Bernhard Klein may trigger an ecstatic essay on the workings of genius may be more surprising today than it would have been in the 1880s; but to find Konradin Kreutzer, Friedrich Schneider, and Heinrich Marschner on the one side (those contributing significantly to the genre), while Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn on the other (whose oeuvres feature relatively few male choruses) reflects all too clearly that this genre – allegedly the culmination of music history – was at best of secondary importance for most great composers of the period. And the emergence of the “composers of the future,” Liszt and Wagner in the first place, just made things worse: the mainstream of music appeared to flow by the male choir, as if around a piece of deadwood.

This breakdown of Widmann’s narrative, of course, only reveals the insufficiency of his approach. As the title of his book implies, the author’s goal was to present the “art-historic development” of the male choir, but the rise of the *Singverein* movement created another

perspective as well: from then on, the genre's significance may lie less in its contribution to 'art history' than in the field of 'social history.' Although Widmann's account by and large ignores this aspect, he certainly recognized the paradigmatic significance of choral singing itself. In this context, the way he describes the dramatic function of operatic choirs is worth quoting:

The basic idea of choral singing in general is the expression of the over-all sentiment of several or many individuals, who are not simply considered to be capable of harmonizing their feelings and of musically expressing this accord, but are indeed put into the same frame of disposition. Whether in reality – where temperament, differences of education, private interests etc. exert an extraordinarily different influence on the disposition – the perfect accord is conceivable for a greater number of individuals; further, whether the way this disposition is expressed can be totally the same, is to be doubted. However, insofar as music as art lifts us away from common reality, and transports us into an ideal world, where everything is perfect, this accord of the state of the individual intellects is not to be considered essential with choral singing either under real life circumstances.

[...] Each voice of the harmonic web expresses the common feeling with the same words, although, from a musical point of view, through its own melody; the accord exists only in the harmonic and rhythmic structure. Every wholly similar being is thus comprised together in one and the same voice. And all the individual voices, as totalities of wholly similar beings, form single persons, so to speak, who may be animated by the same feeling, but musically express it according to their own peculiarity. [...] The more differently the form of the feelings of the individual voices is conceived, the more freely, the more independently each voice emerges from the harmonic web as a specific individual. (p53–54)

In all its abstractness, this characterization clarifies that a choir is perfectly capable of modeling a complex social group. In the case of opera, the identity of this group is evidently determined by the plot: in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* we meet the barbaric Scythians, in Mozart's *Magic Flute* Sarastro's priests, in Beethoven's *Fidelio* the prisoners. But who does the 19<sup>th</sup>-century male choir stand for? Remembering Widmann's thesis that "the folksong turned into an art-form proper precisely in the German male quartet," the answer seems fairly obvious: for him, it is the German *Volk* whose "individual voices, as totalities of wholly similar beings, form single persons," all of whom are "animated by the same feeling" – by their love for the fatherland. This is the truly new aspect of the male choir that appears in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this is the aspect the

detailed examination of which seems essential in writing the history of the genre in this period. As Philipp Spitta noted when criticizing those who believed in a relevant connection between the *Männergesangvereine* and earlier singing groups: “None of their [our ancestors’] poetaster thought of singing about Fatherland and Freedom. But take these ideas away from our male choruses, and see what remains.”<sup>11</sup>

Given that Widmann does not address this ‘social history’ aspect in detail, let me turn in conclusion to Otto Elben’s monograph. As I have mentioned in my introduction, the first edition of this seminal work was published in 1855 under the title *Der volkstümliche deutsche Männergesang, seine Geschichte, seine gesellschaftliche und nationale Bedeutung*, but a revised and significantly augmented second edition appeared as *Der volkstümliche deutsche Männergesang: Geschichte und Stellung im Leben der Nation* in 1887, a mere three years after the publication of Widmann’s book. As both titles suggest, Elben is especially concerned with the genre’s “social and national significance” and its “position [*Stellung*] in the life of the nation,” thus his work provides us with ample information about the “imagined community” the choral movement stood for.

The second edition consists of nine “Books”: Book One tells the prehistory of the genre “From old times” (the original, first-edition version of this section evidently served as model for Widmann’s work as well); Books Two to Seven investigate in detail the 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of male choirs; Book Eight surveys the common repertory (which is thus wholly segregated from the historical part), while the last one adds a personal epilogue “After three generations.” The strictly historical sections strive to present an exceptionally detailed account of the institutions associated with the genre: Book Two discusses Zelter’s Liedertafel and Nägeli’s Zurich male choir together with their respective influence on the emergence of other groups in Germany and Switzerland. Book Three depicts the astonishing spread of Nägeli’s ideas from the Stuttgart Liederkrantz to the later offsprings all over Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria. Special emphasis is given to the revolutionary years 1848–49, as well as to the several Liederfeste that brought about closer personal contact between the different groups.

This chronological survey breaks up with Book Four, wherein Elben theorizes all the above development. First he examines – as the title of his first chapter describes – “The folksong as a means of national education [*Volksbildung*].” He argues that an unfortunate gap has appeared between Art and the *Volk* (or, as he later rephrases: between Art and Life itself; p147–8), which can only be filled by the male choral movement. In addition, the *Männergesang* is able to fill another gap that may have risen between the *Volk* and Religion; first, because it supports “the

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<sup>11</sup> Philipp Spitta, *Musikgeschichtliche Aufsätze*, Berlin, Gebrüder Paetel, 1894, 306.

cultivation of the holy art of folksong singing,” but also by to some extent substituting for the antiquated official forms of religious practice:

If, in the halls of a venerable house of God, a male choir of a thousand voices sings Beethoven’s glorious song of praise, “The Heavens praise the Eternal’s glory,” or a hymn by Bernhard Klein or Franz Schubert, and the vast sound rumbles with terrifying impression – is it not a Service of God that tunes the hearts of the listeners to devotion? *Religion* and *Music* are intimately related to each other, a spiritual tie connects the two fields. (p149)

Elben dedicates his second chapter to “The social significance of the German *Männergesang*,” which he describes as “an important vehicle of our social evolution.” (p152) He cites and agrees with Karl Pfaff’s speech given on the occasion of the first German Liederfest in 1827: “The ridiculous barriers of classes fall before the power of song; the whole choir forms a family united in concord, joy, and enthusiasm.” (p153) But even more intriguing is another quotation, taken from an 1845 toast by Wiggers von Rendsburg, which describes how the choir brings together the singers who arrived from all the different parts of Germany:

Only very few know each other; still, they feel themselves lifted in the consciousness that in this moment a common emotion and the same thought enlivens and pervades the breast of all, which creates a powerful spiritual link among them. (p153)

In this sense, as Elben comments, “the *Sängerfeste* appear as *Volksfeste*”: the singers are able to represent the whole of the people, in accordance with the assumed folksong origin of male choral singing itself. To avoid any misunderstandings, he even assures us that these feasts were “handed down to us by custom from the days of the Middle Ages,” although he admits that “the life of the *Volk* strives toward new forms in which it can assert its joy.” (p154) This transformation is especially evident with respect to the persons fêted:

in the place of the single person step many captured by the same idea: groups, masses, the *Volk*. The manifold relations tend towards unification, the single person appears as a member of the society. Thus, our *Volksfeste* cannot celebrate the victory of the individual any more, this would be too insignificant for the society; instead, they celebrate the victory of unified forces, the victory of an idea. (p154)

Finally, the third chapter considers “The national content of the German *Männergesang*.” Elben’s main point is that the folksong unites all Germans more overarchingly than any religion could, since “the lofty sentiments it praises are not dependent on confession; Protestants and Catholics can profess the Beautiful, the High, the Holy in the same notes by Handel and Mozart.” (p157) Besides, “the agendas of political parties are also wholly foreign to folksong” (p158); instead, “the singing associations assume a *consolatory* function in the noblest sense of the word by resolving the differences of opinion into a single, higher one.” In this sense, “the *German-national* content [...] runs like a thread through the whole history of the male chorus.” (p160)

Elben’s description is so explicit that I almost feel embarrassed to elaborate on it. Although he divides his account into three chapters, he is essentially saying the same thing over and over again. The male choir movement effectively organizes every aspect of life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany: as regards religion, its repertory presents a kind of ecumenical confession whose liturgy is acceptable for any German; as regards social interaction, it creates a single gigantic family of all the people participating in it; and from the national viewpoint, it reduces every individual to his smallest common denominator, his being a member of the German *Volk*. In this light, Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community” is equally applicable to the German nation itself, and to its practical manifestation, the male choir. As we have seen, the choir also unites a number of individuals, who may be different in several respects, but are still ready to merge their identities in an overarching harmony. The barriers of class are broken down here as well as in the idealized *Volk* – thus, choral singing in fact functions both as a model, and as a kind of pre-school for the unification of the Germans. And the quest for extension seems encoded in the movement itself: it is no coincidence that Elben fantasizes of “a choir of a thousand voices,” and that his account of the genre’s modern history reflects a continuous spread and growth from the early efforts of Zelter and Nägeli to the 1862 foundation of the German *Sängerbund* and even further. No doubt, when the numerous singing associations meet at the great *Sängerfeste*, it is not simply the singers themselves that unite in sublime harmony while performing the monumental choruses, but also all the German-speaking lands they arrived from and represent (this connection becomes even obvious in Elben’s Book Five, which bears the title “German Unity – in song”). The “imagined community” that Nägeli and his peers could yet indeed but “imagine,” thus in a sense “realizes” itself in a long process: first by spreading in similar groups all over the German-speaking lands, later by gradually uniting these by a more and more uniform repertory, then by establishing a forum of personal meeting in the form of the great *Liederfeste*, finally by officially uniting these groups in a pan-Germanic Singers’ Union. That this process of “unification in song”

was paralleled by a similar one in politics does not figure heavily in Elben's narrative: the 1871 creation of the German Empire marks no clear break for him, and the whole of Book Eight is dedicated to those groups that still remain outside of this political circle: the *Männergesangvereine* in Hungary, Transylvania, Switzerland, but also in England, France, Northern America.

The above narrative suggests that, in Elben's mind, the long-desired "imagined community" of the unified German nation could hardly have done without the amalgam of the male choral tradition. If so, it is little wonder that, whatever seemed to be missing from the allegedly age-old history of this tradition, had to be filled in by the invention of its politically motivated chroniclers. As I have shown, the idea of any kind of continuity between the *Männergesangvereine* and a German national past is largely fictitious – not merely because the continuity of Germanness itself is questionable (insofar as Tacit's German warriors would have little in common with the *Biedermeier* burgher), but also since the precedents for male part-singing as spelt out by Widmann could have had no relevant influence on the 19<sup>th</sup> century form; not to mention that the whole idea of the *Volk* – and with it: of folksong – was of fairly recent origin. In addition, the "invented tradition" of male choral societies was soon combined with another (equally recent) "invented tradition," that of the *Liederfeste*, which – notwithstanding Elben's desperate arguments for their medieval origins – had relevant precedents only in Switzerland, and were introduced by a conscious effort everywhere else. "Imagination" and "invention" thus appear intermingled throughout the history of the German male choir, the one arguably implying more the spontaneous will, the other more the conscious manipulation of facts. In this light, it is no paradox, but rather a telling tautology, that the German male choral movement was founded on an "imagined tradition" in order to legitimize an essentially "invented community."

### **Summary**

While secular choral singing assumed great importance in the musical life of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, the repertory it gave rise to is all but ignored in modern music history textbooks. No doubt, this omission is primarily due to the genre's strong political associations: many of the overtly nationalistic texts have inevitably seemed inappropriate for most post-1945 musicologists. By contrast, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of an impressive series of works on the topic, all of which drew inspiration from Otto Elben's pioneering *Der volksthümliche deutsche Männergesang: seine Geschichte, seine gesellschaftliche und nationale Bedeutung* (1855; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1887). As Elben's subtitle to some extent foreshadowed, these authors sought to provide the genre with a history that would confirm its "national significance" for the contemporaries as well: the obvious convivial precedents (the ubiquitous drinking-songs) are more or less ignored;

on the other hand, possible connections to earlier “national” musics (like the *Minnesang*, or even the Teutonic bardic songs as described by Tacit) are given great emphasis.

Rather than providing the reader with a wealth of diverse quotations from different authors, I offer a fairly detailed account of a single volume, Benedict Widmann’s *Die kunsthistorische Entwicklung des Männerchors in drei Vorlesungen dargestellt* (1884). This book strives to incorporate the history of the genre into a whole-scale music historical panorama, and – being authored by a Frankfurt schoolmaster, not a music historian – it provides an excellent insight into the most wide-spread myths that surrounded the male choral movement at the time. Instead of scrupulously disproving each of Widmann’s tendentious statements, I propose to read the whole “myth of origin” he presents in the light of modernist analyses of nationalism. Benedict Anderson’s interpretation of the nation as an “imagined community” sheds light on the steadily rising popularity of the *Gesangvereine* in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, while Eric Hobsbawm’s work illuminates how the creation of a consistently elevated and “authentically German” prehistory proved useful in legitimizing an essentially “invented tradition.”