

Grundtvig eStudies

PAMPHLET # 2

Unit for Song Studies, Center for Grundtvig Studies, Aarhus University, 2023

Danish Communal Singing Culture in the 2020ies

A Survey of Singing Habits among Adult Danes in Denmark

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces a comprehensive dataset derived from a large-scale survey focused on communal singing (fællessang) in Denmark. Recently, this cultural practice has garnered significant attention, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Despite its growing prominence, there has been a lack of empirical data concerning the extent, diversity, contexts, and perceptions surrounding communal singing in Denmark—until now. The dataset, compiled from responses of 2,031 Danish adults in October 2022 through a collaboration with YouGov, offers valuable insights into the current state of singing practices and attitudes among the Danish population. This dataset forms the basis for ongoing research projects and forthcoming publications by the Unit for Song Studies at Aarhus University. Appendix 1 contains a detailed spreadsheet of the survey’s comprehensive findings.

KEYWORDS: Communal Singing, Danish Cultural Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Music, Song Studies.

Introduction: A Significant yet Understudied Cultural Practice

Communal singing, known as ‘fællessang’ in Danish, holds a vital place in Danish culture and has garnered increased interest in recent years, further amplified during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Television singalong shows attracted large audiences, but even prior to the pandemic, the prevalence of communal singing events had been

rising, ranging from local gatherings in cafes and libraries to large-scale events such as "Marathon Singing." On a political front, the practice has gained prominence, highlighted by a proposal from the Minister of Culture, Jakob Engel Schmidt, in early 2023 to introduce morning communal singing in Danish elementary schools.

The burgeoning interest in communal singing among Danes ties closely to the narrative of its historical role in shaping Danish national identity.¹ It is widely believed among Danes that singing is a unifying social force.² However, despite its cultural centrality, Danish communal singing culture has received scant scholarly attention. Public discourse is often based on assumptions rather than empirical evidence, leading to questions about the extent of Danish communal singing, its role in fostering community, and its inclusiveness. These aspects have not been systematically and empirically studied until now.

In 2022, with funding from the Augustinus Foundation, we conducted a survey to explore Danish communal singing culture. The survey inquired about the prevalence of communal singing practices, such as the frequency of singing, the contexts in which it occurs, and the public perception of communal singing. The data collected is presented in this paper and forms a comprehensive dataset.

Terminological Issues: *Fællessang* vs. Singing Together

One of the critical methodological decisions in our survey concerned the terminology used to describe the act of communal singing. Initially, we intended to explore the concept of 'fællessang,' a term deeply entrenched in Danish culture, often evoking specific historical and cultural connotations. However, during our preparatory discussions and pilot testing, it became apparent that 'fællessang' was frequently interpreted in a narrow sense, typically associated solely with traditional Danish communal singing practices fostered within the Danish Folk High School tradition and recently promoted in popular media presentations by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.³ This narrow interpretation risked excluding various forms of contemporary and less formal singing activities from our study.

To address this limitation, we made a pivotal decision to replace 'fællessang' with 'synge sammen,' translated as 'singing together.' This strategic rephrasing was more than a mere linguistic adjustment; it represented a significant shift in the scope of our inquiry. 'Singing together' encompasses a broader, more inclusive range of singing activities, transcending the traditional boundaries implied by 'fællessang.'⁴ It opened

¹ Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig, "Den inderlige deltagelse," *Grundtvig-Studier* 65 (2014): 157–175; Lea Wierød Borčak, and Katrine Frøkjær Baunvig, "Medial Conditions for Social Bonding in Singing," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 52, no. 2 (2021): 391–416.

² Lea Wierød Borčak, "Community as a discursive construct in contemporary Danish singing culture," *SoundEffects* 9, no. 1 (2020): 82–97.

³ Lea Wierød Borčak, and Henrik Marstal, *Fællessang – fælles sag? En bog om sang som kollektiv handling* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Højskolerne, 2022).

⁴ Correspondingly, song historian Karl Clausen observed in a seminal study a distinct contrast between the formal tradition of singing from songbooks and the often academically neglected yet widespread

up our investigation to include informal and spontaneous singing events, such as impromptu singing at private parties, morning assembly singing in schools, or group singing at sporting events. This inclusive approach allowed us to capture the essence of Danish singing culture in its most expansive form, reflecting a diversity of practices and contexts.

Furthermore, using 'singing together' helped to mitigate the potential bias and preconceptions associated with 'fællessang.' By adopting this broader term, we could more accurately gauge the prevalence and nature of group singing activities among Danes, without the limitations imposed by the traditional understanding of 'fællessang.' This decision was vital in ensuring that our survey accurately reflected the current landscape of Danish singing culture, including its various manifestations and nuances.

To guide respondents in understanding this broadened concept, we included a detailed introduction in the questionnaire. This introduction clarified that 'singing together' should be perceived as any singing activity where everyone present has the opportunity to participate, irrespective of the setting or primary purpose of the gathering. This clarification was crucial in ensuring that respondents considered a wide array of singing situations, thereby providing us with a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Danish singing practices.

Data and Methodology

The survey was executed in collaboration with YouGov Denmark, targeting a panel of Danish adults. The data, collected in October 2022, included responses from 2,031 Danish adults and was weighted according to gender, age, and geography based on standards from Danmarks Statistik [Statistics Denmark], ensuring representativeness. The survey delved into the prevalence and distribution of communal singing in Denmark, as well as attitudes towards it, exploring questions like when, where, how often, and with whom Danes engage in singing and their feelings about singing with others. The questionnaire comprised 35 questions, including sub-questions, divided into three sections: recent singing behavior, attitudes towards singing with others, and social background of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic variables for sampling.

Gender	Women	1,028	50.6%
	Men	1,003	49.4%
Age	18-34	557	27.4%
	35-54	663	32.6%
	55+	811	39.9%
Region	Capital city area	643	31.6%

practice of informal communal singing in everyday life: Karl Clausen, *Dansk folkesang gennem 150 år* (Copenhagen: Tingluti Forlag, 1958).

Zealand	293	14.4%
Southern Denmark	428	21.1%
Central Jutland	459	22.6%
Northern Jutland	208	10.2%

The initial segment of our survey delves into participants' singing habits, eliciting details about the frequency of their singing, and exploring the occasions, locations, and social contexts linked to this activity. For the majority of these inquiries, we requested participants to reflect on their singing habits over the past four years (2019–2022). This specific timeframe was selected to encompass responses beyond the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during and after the lockdowns in Denmark. These lockdowns significantly altered social interactions and celebratory events where singing typically occurs. Additionally, to capture current trends in singing behavior among Danish adults, we included questions about the participants' most recent group singing experiences.

The second part of the questionnaire probes the informants' attitudes concerning singing with others. Particularly important questions in this section concerned whether the informants *enjoy* singing with others, whether singing creates a sense of *community*, and what value they ascribe to *lyrical* and *melodic content* when singing together. This group of questions are constructed as a battery of items, measuring responses as a Likert-scale on the spectrum: *Strongly disagree, partly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, partly agree, strongly agree*.

The last part of the questionnaire concerns social background and includes issues such as upbringing, schooling, nationality, political attitudes and religious attitudes as well as questions about the informants' current socioeconomic status.

Dataset and research

The survey dataset, a crucial resource for current and future research, is available in an Excel spreadsheet as part of the eStudies pamphlets published by Center for Grundtvig Studies and Unit for Song Studies at Aarhus University. It is also accessible on the open science platform Zenodo. The dataset underpins various research publications from the Unit for Song Studies, including a comprehensive report on the status of communal singing in the 2020s, a typology of Danish communal singing, and several articles on related themes such as voice shame, musical non-participation, and cultural heritage.

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