

M. J. GRANT

AULD LANG SYNE

A Song and its Culture





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1. Elements of a Theory of Song

song (n.) that which is sung; a short poem or ballad suitable for singing or set to music; the melody to which it is sung; an instrumental composition of similar form and character; singing; the melodious outburst of a bird; any characteristic sound; a poem, or poetry in general; a theme of song; a habitual utterance, manner, or attitude towards anything; a fuss; a mere trifle (as in *going for a song* being sold for a trifling sum).¹

There we have it: a song is a mere trifle, a thing of little value. Songs were indeed bought and sold for a penny as long ago as the sixteenth century; used, abused, and paraphrased in popular operas and musicals as the dictates of fashion recommended; hijacked for political rallies and played *ad nauseum* in the background of cafés and bars and offices, not to mention being sung in public by drunken football fans and in private by part-time divas in the shower. The more annoyingly banal songs are, the more likely to get stuck in our heads like a scratched record: the German word *Ohrwurm*, ear-worm, wonderfully captures the way songs seem to crawl into our aural cavities and nest there. Thus these tenacious morsels of human communication flit across social, geographical, temporal, and musical boundaries in the manner of what song researchers once called a migrating melody, “one of those winged little things which you will find everywhere and nowhere, which you pick up in the street and which, in polymorphous versatility, appear today in a rambunctious Broadway dance and tomorrow in a solemn Mass”.² Songs, it seems, are no trifles at all.

1.1 The Social Functions of Song

But of course songs are no trifles. Indeed, David Huron, exploring the role music may have played in the evolution of the human species, draws particular attention to them:

Consider the following question: What is the most successful piece of music in modern history? Of course the answer to this question depends on how we define success—and this is far from clear, as esthetic philosophers have shown. Nevertheless, I want to use a straightforward criterion: let us assume that the most successful musical work is the one that is most performed and most heard. Using this criterion, you might be surprised by the answer. The most successful musical work was composed by Mildred and Patti Hill in 1893, and revised in the 1930s. The piece in question is, of course, “Happy Birthday”.

1 Definition from the 1998 edition of *The Chambers Dictionary* (Schwarz et al. 1998, 1576).

2 Nettl 1952, 29.

“Happy Birthday” has been translated into innumerable languages and is performed on the order of a million times a day. It remained under copyright protection until the middle of the twentieth century. For many people, the singing of “Happy Birthday” is the only time they sing in public. For other people, the singing of “Happy Birthday” constitutes the only time they sing at all.³

Happy Birthday is just one of the examples Huron uses to demonstrate that if music did have an evolutionary function—and he is not convinced that it did—this was almost certainly related to social bonding. His exploration, which draws on evidence from biology, developmental psychology, and anthropology, echoes what song researchers in particular have long felt to be the key role played by singing and song in consolidating personal and group identity.⁴

Auld Lang Syne is a slightly more complex example than *Happy Birthday*. The song’s text has more serious literary pretensions, for one thing, and is linked to one of the world’s most famous poets. The development of the traditions surrounding the song are less self-explanatory than the habit of singing *Happy Birthday* on birthdays. Moreover, for many people, not only those of Scottish heritage, *Auld Lang Syne* is firmly linked to their sense of who they are. In other ways, however, *Auld Lang Syne* is very much in the mould of *Happy Birthday*: sung routinely at specific events, and at specific points in time, by people who never otherwise sing, it is a social song *par excellence*. The paths taken by *Auld Lang Syne* and its constituent elements, the myriad contexts in which it appears, and the sundry ways in which people have sought to inject new meaning and significance into it, present a casebook example of the cultural connections and disconnections which can be traced by following a simple song on its journey through history, and through the mouths, minds and hearts of those who come into contact with it.

In tracing the history of *Auld Lang Syne*, this book will draw on a number of earlier studies of song and of singing generally. In particular, my approach is influenced by a long tradition of song research in Germany. This tradition began, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as research into “folksong”, conceived of originally as songs which had emerged, at some distant point in the past, in agrarian communities and had been transmitted orally down the generations since. As time went on, however, researchers became increasingly uneasy about the standard conception of what a folksong was. They began to realise that what many people regarded as their own local and ancient folksongs were often songs written or published only ten or twenty years earlier by someone from a very different area and tradition. This did not stop people in a particular locality from claiming these songs as their own, however; this

3 Huron 2006, 55–56.

4 Of the many other indicators Huron mentions in his exploration of music and evolution, one is the sheer amount of time afforded to music in many human societies, including—and this is important—in subsistence societies. It has long been recognized that musical activity is as characteristic of the human species as language is, being found in every known society; the fact that even societies which face a day-to-day struggle for existence often still dedicate a significant amount of their resources to music gives added credence to the central role music plays in human social relations.

led John Meier, founder of the German Folksong Archive (*Deutsches Volksliedarchiv*), to suggest that the real difference between a “folksong” and, say, an art song by Robert Schumann, was this relation of “ownership” (Meier’s term is *Herrenverhältnis*; my translation is closer to Ernst Klusen’s term *Eigentumsverhältnis*).⁵ In other words, the song was the folk’s song, and not, for example, Schumann’s. Later, Meier’s pupil Ernst Klusen suggested that the term “folksong” should be replaced by “group song”, further shifting the emphasis onto the songs people actually sing, regardless of origin, and why they sing them.⁶

The term “group song”, as Klusen defined it, should not be confused with “group singing”. Singing certain songs in a group context can be a highly significant factor in what makes these songs important for the group, but the term “group song” specifically focuses on the significance of the song for the group, as opposed to group singing per se. (Group songs do not, in fact, have to be *sung* in a group to make them songs of a group). A growing body of research is exploring social and psychological aspects of group *singing*, primarily though not exclusively in more formalized contexts in which the group comes together specifically for that purpose (for example, choirs).⁷ Group *songs*, on the other hand—songs with which groups identify, and regard as *their* songs—are often more powerful in contexts where musical communication is not the group’s *raison d’être*, but is nevertheless one of the practices which help consolidate and express that group’s identity. The groups concerned may be primary groups, but very often they are secondary groups—in other words, larger groups or communities who may not be in personal contact, but share certain aspects of identity.

The personal relationships people have to particular songs, including within the social groups with which they identify, can be very powerful. People of a certain age in Britain will remember “Our Tune”, a spot in a radio broadcast of the 1980s when a listener’s own touching story of love and/or loss was told on air, concluding with the song which the listener unequivocally connected with the experience. And as Adela Peeva explored in her award-winning film *Whose Is This Song* (2003), heated debate can ensue regarding national or ethnic ownership of a song: Peeva’s example is a song claimed by multiple Balkan nations as their own. Similarly, to attempt to prescribe or proscribe what songs a group may use to identify themselves can be perceived as a direct attack on the identity of the group in question, as J. Martin Daughtry has discussed in the case of the Russian national anthem, and as I have also explored with regard to football songs in Scotland.⁸

5 See, e.g., Meier 1906; Klusen 1989, 167. For more on these historical developments, see Heimann 1982, Linder-Beroud 1989. In the year 2000, the yearbook published by the *Deutsches Volksliedarchiv* changed its name from *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung* / *Yearbook of Folksong Research* to *Lied und populäre Kultur* / *Song and Popular Culture*. The Archive itself was reconstituted as part of the new Zentrum für Populäre Kultur und Musik (Centre for Popular Culture and Music) of the University of Freiburg from 2014.

6 Klusen 1967.

7 See, e.g., Ahlquist (ed.) 2006; Davidson & Faulkner 2019.

8 Daughtry 2003, Grant 2014.

There are any number of types of social groups for whom “their” songs are a crucial part of who they are, and very many ways in which this musical interaction can happen. Perhaps everyone sings together; or perhaps one person, or a number of people, sing while the rest listen and contribute in some other way. The contexts of group song may be very informal (for example, a group of children singing as they play) or they may be slightly more institutionalised (for example, a group which always leads the singing during a church service). Nowadays, musical interaction in groups might involve no-one singing live, but recorded music being played in the background. In the most general of terms, musical interaction—in Walter Heimann’s view, any interaction through music—also takes place when two teenagers talk about their favourite bands, or, at a distance, when I read a review of a concert in the local newspaper.

Figure 1.1 shows just some of the ways that this interaction may occur, from the relatively simple form where everyone takes part in the singing, through various other forms including the introduction of external musicians playing live or via recording. It is not irrelevant for the present discussion that the context shown in Figure 1.1a, which Klusen and other scholars such as John Blacking regard as being the most fundamental and probably also the most widespread throughout human history, can be demonstrated with the typical setting of *Auld Lang Syne*;⁹ but how *Auld Lang Syne* arrived in that particular group setting has a lot to do with the more complex set-ups detailed in the other diagrams. The examples also demonstrate that musical interaction is not limited to situations in which those involved themselves sing or play.¹⁰ Another possibility, which Klusen called *Stellvertretung* or “proxy”, is shown in Figure 1.1c: at this party, or at least at this point in the party, the music is not generated by the people there, but comes from a playlist chosen by someone present (not pictured is the group of women in the kitchen who are joining in at the chorus). A non-technical version of this “singing by proxy” occurs when certain members of the group have a particular role as the ones who always create or lead the music for the rest of the group (such as the guitarist who has to accompany Jim in Figure 1.1b). Figure 1.1d shows a more institutionalized, but still non-professional version of this. In Figure 1.1e, individuals and groups of friends attending a concert form one part of a larger group of people with whom they are not acquainted and may never come together again; in this professional context, their control is generally limited to showing their appreciation or displeasure (including by the purchase of tickets). And Figure 1.1f? Our homesick exile may be associating *Auld Lang Syne* with Scotland or another native land or the people they left behind there; the relationship to the song which they shared with these people recalls their relationship to them, even though the people concerned are absent.

9 Blacking 1973.

10 Heimann 1982.

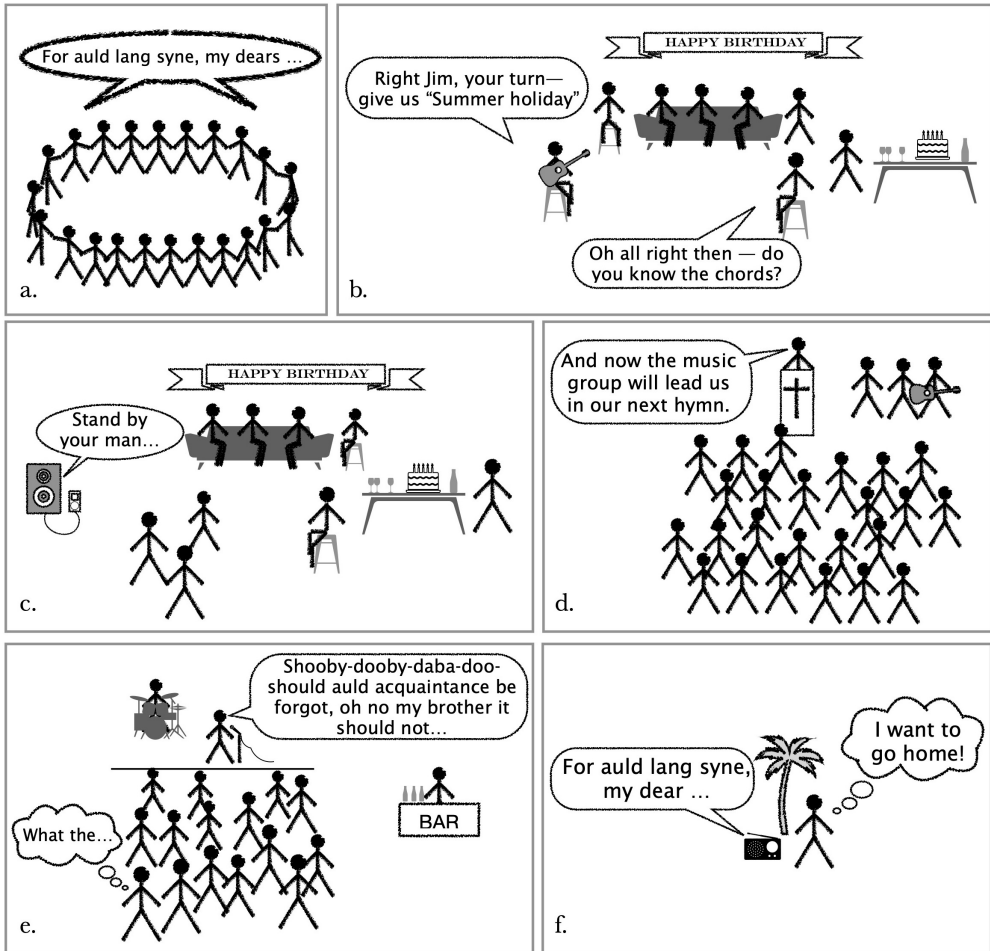


Fig. 1.1 Group songs in various interactional contexts. Figure created by author (2021).

Most of the examples above deal with what anthropologists call *primary groups*, in which each individual has at least the potential of a direct relationship with the group's other members. However, some (particularly Figure 1.1e) also touch on the notion of *secondary groups*, a term used to describe larger groups of which I can be a member without necessarily having an active relationship with other members (for example, the group of "Scots"). Research into group song has traditionally focussed on primary groups for a number of reasons, including the fact that such groups are small and relatively stable. One key function of song is not addressed by this approach, however: communication across larger regional, national, and international communities. As the history of *Auld Lang Syne* will demonstrate, however, primary or "face-to-face" groups can also play a significant role in this transmission over a wider area, particularly in the case of groups which are themselves part of larger national or transnational networks.

The transmission of songs between different social groups can take many forms. When a song is taken from one group context into another, particularly when these groups are separated in time or space, there has to be some way of it getting there. The physical carrier of the song may be a human being, a book or other written document, a radio broadcast, or a sound recording, to take just some examples. Some of the basic ways in which songs can be transported or "carried" from one context or group to another are illustrated in Figure 1.2. Figure 1.2a shows groups which see themselves

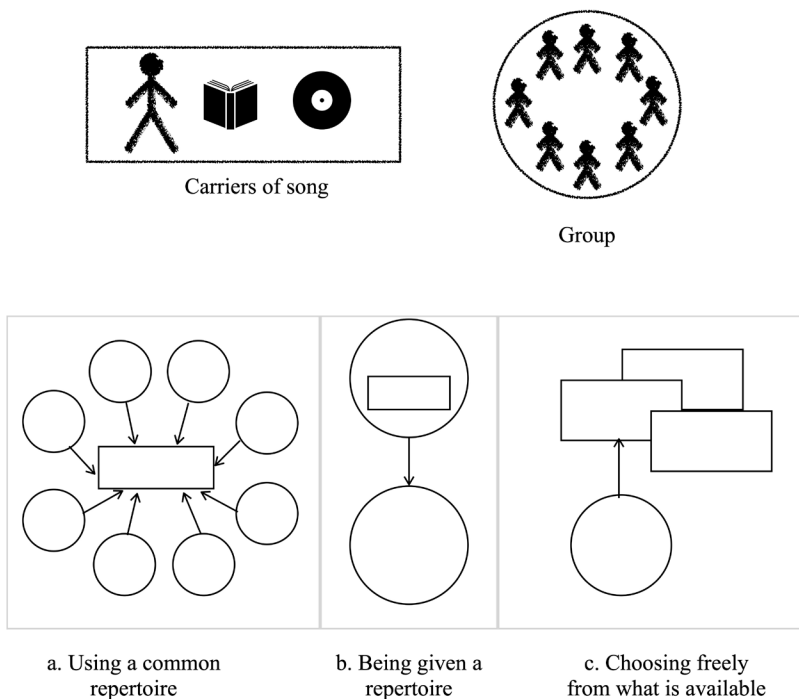


Fig. 1.2 Some carriers of song and scenarios of transmission. Figure created by author (2021).

as part of a larger entity or network, and the use of a common repertoire of songs—for example, from the same book—is one way in which they express this. A typical example of 1.2b would be intergenerational, such as when repertoire is passed on from teachers to pupils; while Figure 1.2c shows the more informal process by which, say, a group or an individual decides which recording or item of sheet music to buy from the stock available, or which songs to adopt into their own repertoire from the many that they have heard or sung.

Taking the processes represented in both Figures 1.1 and 1.2 as a starting point, some fundamental questions arise. Who decides what songs are used, and on what basis? How do some songs become available for use, and others not? How is our attention drawn to particular songs, and how does our own use of or attitude to particular songs impact on other people's use of these songs? And finally, why do some songs prove much more successful than others? Looking at the historical evidence is a useful starting point for answering some of these questions.

1.2 The Songs Folk Sing: Some Historical Evidence

"Play it once, Sam, for old time's sake [...] Play it Sam. Play *As Time Goes By*."¹¹

Familiarity does not always breed contempt. The songs folk sing, or choose to have sung to them, are generally the songs they know and love. But how do these songs get known in the first place?

The first point to note is that among the songs folk sing, there is a strong preference for familiar tunes, and this in turn can increase familiarity with the tune itself by encouraging its use in new contexts. Parodies of existing songs, and contrafacta—new words written to an old tune—are very important, including as indications of familiarity with a particular tune or the song with which it is more commonly associated. Neither of these aspects say anything about the structure of the song itself, except in relation to other songs of its ilk. They merely reiterate one of those common-sense statements about music that conceal a richness of important information: everybody likes a good tune, and particularly a tune that they know.

To see how important this is, let us look again at Figure 1.2. This is the area in which we might expect quite radical transformations over the course of human history, given that musical media, and the social contexts in which music is made and received, have undergone untold revolutions, probably the most important being the invention of music printing (fifteenth century, extensively modernized in the early eighteenth century), the establishment of the modern music publishing industry (eighteenth century, greatly expanded in the nineteenth century), and the invention of sound recording and replay technologies (late nineteenth century onwards). So what, then, has altered? In the sixteenth century, everyone loved a good tune, and particularly

11 Ilse Laszlo (Ingrid Bergman) in the film *Casablanca*, dir. Michael Curtiz (1942).

a tune that they knew. For example: in a study of the use of music as a vehicle for spreading and consolidating the message of the Reformation of Christianity in the sixteenth century, Rebecca Wagner Oettinger argued that song played a fundamental role, and many of the examples she traces are either parodies or contrafacta of existing tunes or would have been sung to any tune that fit.¹² She suggests that, as well as making the songs easier to distribute, the familiarity of the tunes and the structure of the texts could have helped consolidate the identity of the Protestant community, particularly since people may yearn for something stable and recognisable in an era of great upheaval. Jumping forward in time, it is equally clear that publishers of music and songs in the nineteenth century realised that everyone loved a good tune, and particularly a tune that they knew: this helps account for the abundance of sets of variations on particular tunes, such as those on *Auld Lang Syne* discussed later in this book, and the frequency of the phrase “To the tune of ...” in chapbooks, broadsides, and songbooks of this era, particularly those without printed music. It would seem that there is no putting a good tune down, and the best tune for achieving this is the one you already know—or think you know.

There are a number of reasons for this, and the first is purely practical. Relatively few people are musically literate in the sense that they can read music notation. The mass distribution media for song in earlier centuries—broadsides, pamphlets, chapbooks—most often did not contain written music. Many studies have therefore concentrated on the texts of the songs as vehicles for a certain content, but the vehicle itself—the singing of a song, with a tune—has often been swept over. How, then, was the music transmitted? Just like we learn most music today: by hearing it. The hawkers selling the song on the street would sing it, for example, and while the reach of this would not even nearly approximate that of transmission via broadcast media, it would certainly have given people a chance to learn the tune, particularly if it was catchy. In many cases, however, the answer is even more simple: the tune wasn’t directly or consciously transmitted at all, because it was already known, either by the individuals themselves or by others in groups within which they sang, where processes of oral transmission could ensure that a repertoire be passed on without recourse to printed music (notably, learning the words of songs is a more tricky process, which is another reason why there are so many songbooks in existence which include the text only). Where a completely new song is to be introduced, it makes sense to use a tune that people already know. This may be indicated by the instruction to sing the song “To the tune of...”; in some cases, the tune intended would be apparent from the fact that the new lyrics presented were an obvious parody on existing ones (which is how “On top of Old Smokey / All covered with snow / I lost my true lover / For courting too slow” became “On top of spaghetti / All covered with cheese / I lost my poor meatball / When somebody sneezed”).

¹² Oettinger 2001.

The use of a single tune, or very similar tune, for many different songs, is still widespread. Think for example of the tune known in English as *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, and in French as *Ah! Vous dirai-je maman*, a tune also arranged by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.¹³ With very few alterations this is also the basic tune for another very common children's song, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. As Figure 1.3 shows, the only difference in the opening line is that the second bar of *Baa Baa Black Sheep* is slightly more ornamented, which accommodates the text: there are more syllables, hence more notes. The examples also demonstrate how simple the tunes are: they open with what in music theory is called the interval of a fifth, one of the strongest harmonic intervals in European tonal music; the tune then goes up to the next note in the major scale, before coming back down in simple steps: soh-fa-mi-re-doh. Parents and teachers of young children in English-speaking countries may also have noticed the similarity between the traditional *Here We Go Round The Mulberry Bush* and the rather more post-lapsian *The Wheels On The Bus Go Round And Round*. I have also known that tune used for *The Present For X Goes Round And Round*, created for birthday parties: simply insert the name of the birthday girl or boy.



Fig. 1.3 The opening of the nursery rhymes *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and *Baa Baa Black Sheep* (and *Ah! Vous-dirai je maman*). Set by author using MuseScore (2021).

Another example occurs when we grow out of our childhood fascination for farm animals and public transport, grow into the reality of social injustice, and take to the streets in protest. A study by Barbara James of songbooks which appeared in the context of the German anti-nuclear protests at Wyhl in the 1970s shows that the majority of songs used were based on familiar songs or tunes, and Leslie Shepard noted the same practice used by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1950s Britain.¹⁴ In the 1920s, before they came to power, the German National Socialists or Nazis were extremely adroit in using songs to spread their message: one anecdote concerns their own version of the socialist anthem *The Internationale*, which Nazi radicals sang on a march through a decidedly left-wing area of Berlin.¹⁵ More recently in the same city, people demonstrating against the 2003 Iraq War joined in the chorus of *George Bush We*

13 Twelve variations on "Ah ! Vous dirai-je maman", K[oechel] 265.

14 James 1977, Shepard 1962.

15 Dithmar 1999.

Will Stop You—to a tune more commonly associated with the words *We Will, We Will Rock You*.¹⁶

These examples should make clear how important this phenomenon is on many different levels and in many aspects of social life—and how persistent and consistent it is. From a historical point of view, the texts of songs found in broadsides and chapbooks may appear of prime importance since it is they, indeed, that provide information—in most cases, it is the texts alone that are “new”. But this has led to a widespread neglect of the fundamental question—why songs? And why these songs? Not just, as Simon Frith asked (1989), why do songs have words, but why do words have songs? As Otto Holzapfel described,

Quite unlike prose, which can be read and discussed with a sense of distance, a song is a “Trojan horse” whose ideological content it is all too easy to accept without question. In the act of singing, there is rarely thinking: the physical process of singing distracts us, the sound alone enthuses us and thus suppresses our critical distance.¹⁷

People talk about the power of song, and by the same token underestimate exactly what role it can play. History warns us against complacency here: in the description of the late German journalist Carola Stern, the “Third Reich” was the “singing dictatorship”.¹⁸

The use and abuse of the notion of tradition—“traditional values” or “traditional song”—for political ends has rightly led many people to be wary. In the 1980s, British historians drew attention to the ideological bases of many an apparently innocent appeal to “the folk” and to “tradition”—this critique was most clearly focussed in the concept of “invented tradition” discussed by Eric Hobsbawm, David Cannadine, and others, while in song research, Dave Harker coined the term “fakesong” to describe how English folksong researchers from the later nineteenth century purveyed the ideal of rural folksong at the expense of the music actually used and enjoyed by working people in cities and towns.¹⁹ Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, meanwhile, have argued convincingly for the importance of the “mobilization of tradition” as a key factor in unifying and motivating social movements. Social movements, they suggest, provide a space and a mechanism by which elements from “tradition” are reinterpreted and recombined, a process which often results in cultural transformations not necessarily directly related to the aims of the movement, and which remain in place even after the movement itself has faded into historical memory. Their study focuses on the relationship between music and a number of social movements in the twentieth century, particularly the American civil rights movement, which played a key role in the “folk music revival” of the mid-twentieth century. Although the mobilization of tradition can take on many forms, they argue that it is no accident that music seems to play such an important role here. As they describe,

16 Personal recollection.

17 Holzapfel 1998, 67.

18 Quoted in Niedhart 1999, 5.

19 Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Harker 1985.

it is often the seemingly simplest songs that evoke the strongest emotions, primarily because they are the bearers of musical tradition. Indeed, part of the power of many protest songs stems from their use of familiar tunes, both sacred and secular. And while no doubt serving as magnets, they also open channels of identification through which the past can become the present.²⁰

In the most simple and banal sense, one of the reasons why familiar tunes can have this effect is that, when someone recognizes a tune, they themselves feel recognized; through being able to sing the tunes, or appreciate the parody, they feel invited to participate; *they feel they belong*.

Whether at a Christmas carol service, or a reunion event, people time and again want to sing “the old songs”. These “old songs” may not be old at all: what is important is that *they are old for those who sing them*. A song which I associate with my childhood, because I sang it then or heard it sung then, will generate associated feelings of being and of belonging. It is irrelevant when the song was written, and those who have been the most successful as propagandists and in attempting to structure the minds of a nation have recognized that the trick is to get them when they are young—no wonder Martin Luther put so much emphasis on singing in schools; no wonder, in more recent times, both the government and Maoist troops in Nepal insisted on children singing, respectively, the national or Maoist anthems.²¹

Heimann uses another example to illustrate this very basic function of song. As he discusses, throughout history there have been many reports of people who have been sentenced to death starting to sing just before execution. Referring to one report regarding people on death row in Pretoria at the height of apartheid, Heimann asks what songs these condemned men sang, and concludes that they were

undoubtedly the “old” songs, in other words the ones they have known for years, perhaps since their childhood, and which in their function as bearers of feelings, values and reminiscences represent part of their own prevailing order to which they can orient themselves with some sense of purpose as they await death.²²

This is conjecture, of course: Heimann does not know what songs were sung, but the suggestion is convincing. In the face of a cruel and inhuman power structure, people react with a retreat into what they know and love, and into what confirms their humanity despite all treatment to the contrary.²³

20 Eyerman & Jamison 1998, 43.

21 As shown in the documentary film *Schools in the Crossfire* (dir. by Deepak Thapa, 2004).

22 Heimann 1982, 164–165.

23 For further examples, see, e.g., <https://www.cantoscautivos.org/en/index.php>, relating to political detention under Pinochet in Chile; there are also many examples pertaining to the Holocaust. In both these cases and many more, singing and music have also been used by perpetrators as a form of persecution and ill-treatment against prisoners, including in the form of forced singing. See, e.g., Fackler 2007.

1.3 Implied and Inherited Significance

The preceding discussion has emphasized how important songs are for groups and the individuals who make up groups; it has indicated that simple tunes, and tunes that are already familiar to at least some individuals, have the best chance of becoming adopted and adapted by more and more people in turn; and that part of the appeal of familiar songs is the sense of recognition they bring—when people recognize the song, they themselves feel recognized. Here, we are beginning to move beyond logistical reasons why certain songs become popular, into the realm of meaning and significance—why people identify with certain songs, and why this in turn can be so important for their sense of identity as individuals and as groups.

A sense of identity is one of the most basic needs people have—not so much in the static sense of “being” someone, but in the more dynamic sense of identifying with someone or something. We are social animals: we need the security of groups, and most of the world’s problems start when we exclude people from groups, or they feel excluded from them. Identification therefore has to do with a sense of community: it is an understanding of personal identity with reference to a particular social group.

There are many ways in which music is used to express identity.²⁴ Personal identity is a complex thing, and we identify with several social groups and practices simultaneously. We sing *Happy Birthday*, for example, because that is what people do on birthdays, and we belong to this group of “people”. On a more localized level, we might identify with particular songs and want to sing them because they have always been sung in our family.²⁵ Repetition, ritual, continuity over time, in whatever context and whatever the steering forces may be, can be an essential factor in creating identification with a song. There are other possibilities too: for example, a new song may appear which reflects a sentiment important to the community involved; for this reason, it can very quickly create a sense of identification, and consequently be absorbed readily into the social practices of the group.

In this study, I will use the terms *implied significance* and *inherited significance* to indicate two of the main ways that songs can start to become significant for a particular group.²⁶ *Implied significance* means that the song’s use in a particular context is at least implied in the content of, for example, its words or tune: *White Christmas* is a Christmas song, *Happy Birthday* is a song for birthdays. *Inherited significance* occurs where there is apparently little or nothing to link a song to a particular circumstance, event or tradition to which it has nevertheless gained an association over time: for example, *Auld Lang Syne*’s use as a song signifying New Year. Songs become significant through a number of different processes, and why particular songs are significant may not be

24 And many, many recent academic discussions on identity generally and identity and music specifically: I will not attempt to list or even sample them here.

25 I have discussed this phenomenon in more depth in Grant 2018.

26 These terms are inspired in part by the discussion in Heimann 1982, who talks of “elementary-rational” and “aesthetic-rational” orientations.

immediately apparent to an outsider: this is demonstrated by the experience of many folksong collectors who were surprised by a particular community's traditional use of a certain song as part of a ritual celebration where to the outside observer there was no apparent link between the content of the song and the meaning of the ritual or occasion in question.²⁷ Particular songs are sung specifically because they have taken on added meaning in this context, and thus can help generate or regenerate positive feelings of belonging.²⁸ As noted, this additional meaning of the song may only be apparent to those directly involved in the tradition, and not to an external observer. For example, an outsider who happens to be invited to a family party may not quite understand the enthusiasm with which a particular uncle's version of a particular song is greeted. One of the characteristics of a strong social group is that there is an element of the hermetic in it; and that annual rendition of *Summer Holiday* sung by Jim in Figure 1.1b is not mere entertainment, but part of the ties that bind.

The potential of singing in the formation and consolidation of groups is generally recognized and cannot be overemphasized. As Klusen puts it, singing is "the acoustic declaration of unquestioned commonality" and is therefore an act of emotional identification, the "form of unified behaviour par excellence".²⁹ Different types of groups will have different attitudes to singing, however—middle managers may not rate singing too highly on the list of team-building exercises, though this will doubtless pop up in motivational management manuals one of these years (in Japan it is standard practice). In compulsory groups such as these, singing is often promoted to strengthen binds that may not occur naturally. However, group-building depends on several factors: singing is not a magic wand that brainwashes people into signing up for a group identity they would not otherwise adopt; the workings of group song are much more subtle than that. Songs and singing cannot of themselves generate a group identity, but they can help reinforce what is already there. In part, this is related to the action of coordinating ourselves in time—physically and mentally—which occurs when we sing together (or when one of our number does so, and we afford this our full attention). In addition, by triggering the emotional centres associated with identity and community, song may make the claims or agenda of a particular social group seem more appealing than they otherwise would be; moreover, as any advertising executive will tell you, a catchy tune will stick in your memory much longer than even the most carefully structured image of a tube of toothpaste, or a family car, or whatever else it is that we are supposed to buy.

27 Klusen regarded this as typical of group songs. He suggested that groups tend to be "uncritical", "unhistorical", and "unreal" in their choice of songs: uncritical, because there are no clear aesthetic criteria—very different songs are brought together; unhistorical, because the feeling that a song is an "old song" may have nothing to do with its actual age, but the fact that those singing it have done so for as long as they can remember (and therefore tend to think it is older than it possibly is); unreal, because the content of the song is not intended to express the actual situation of the person or persons singing. C.f. the discussion in Heimann 1982, 68–75; 139ff.

28 See also Heimann 1982, 63–64.

29 Klusen 1989, 170.

One final point is important here. People do not just sing as an expression of who they are, but *who they want to be*, and *what they aspire to*, individually or in a group. The “utopian” use of song—*We Shall Overcome!*—is one aspect of this. It is also a basic feature of karaoke, which, in at least some cases, links the success of a particular performer specifically to their ability to mimic the original performer of the song in question.³⁰ The less technically advanced version involves singing in front of a mirror, holding a hairbrush instead of a microphone.

The challenge of any theory of song which could do justice to the real role played by singing in human social life is to be open to all of the contexts in which a given song appears; to analyse them as objectively as is possible; and to avoid, as far as possible, statements of value which present one rendition of the song as “better” or “more authentic” than another, or one group of people as more qualified to understand or sing the song than another. Songs mean real things to real people, and to understand these meanings is to better understand these people. This, then, is the programme of the present study of *Auld Lang Syne*.

1.4 *Auld Lang Syne* as an Object of Research: Some Issues

Auld Lang Syne may be a Scots song, but its success has always extended far beyond the geographical and cultural boundaries of Scotland and the Scottish people. Much research into the functions of song has enjoyed the luxury of being able to focus on small and, to an extent, homogeneous groups or communities which are distinctive enough to allow for close empirical analysis both of the repertoire of the songs used and other aspects of the group’s activity, from how songs are learned to how they are sung. In the case of *Auld Lang Syne*, we are faced with a problem: to analyze the social context of *Auld Lang Syne* is to attempt to analyze processes of informal and spontaneous singing among social groups which may only come together incidentally (and leave little or no records of having done so), and to understand what links these primary groups with one another, and why.

Another problem is that components of songs—the text and the tune, and the sentiment, and other things besides—have a habit of separating and reforming in different contexts. Broadside ballads, as noted above, could have been sung to a whole variety of tunes, or were specifically parodies of earlier songs. So when is a song the same song, and when is it not a song at all? What is the relationship between a mobile phone ringtone using the common tune of *Auld Lang Syne*, and the song published to this tune in 1799? Does it make any sense to consider this ringtone within a theoretical framework based on the importance of singing and song? And does a set of classical piano variations on the most common tune of *Auld Lang Syne* have anything to do with the way it is sung at the end of the annual Trades Union Congress in the United Kingdom? Ostensibly, no. And yet there is a connection, and at a very fundamental level. To understand it, we need to view *Auld*

30 See, e.g., Wienker-Piepho 1996.

Lang Syne not simply as a song, but as a cultural phenomenon—a phenomenon driven, to complete the circle, by the special position of singing and song in human social life.

The many elements of this phenomenon are connected to each other by sometimes only the most delicate of threads, threads so long and fine that they may be invisible to those encountering the element in question in their day-to-day life. Sometimes it may seem that the threads have been broken, or are no longer relevant: the centre of the web is also dependent on your perspective. Traditionally, we would suggest that the centre of the web is the origin—the point from which all further strands are strung. This is why it may seem important to know what the song was originally (and who the spider was). But then, what does “originally” mean here? If, as many Burns scholars argue, we can trace forerunners of *Auld Lang Syne* back to the fifteenth century, then does our modern song itself become trivial, a poor cousin of the original? Hardly. And is the modern Japanese acceptance of the tune as a Japanese folksong any less “authentic” than the Scottish insistence that the song is Scottish in origin? It all depends on what we want to find out. If authorship and aesthetics are important, then the focus is quite specific and tight. If social practice and human behaviour is our subject, then there is no end to what can happen. What becomes interesting, then, is when the same kinds of things happen again and again and again.

This study will, therefore, take a multifarious form of *Auld Lang Syne* as its fluid centre. The most important recurring elements in this complex, and the shorthand I will use for them, are as follows:

The Tunes

M1 (Fig. 1.4) is the tune as published with the words in James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* in 1796. This is what people sometimes refer to as “the original tune” or “the tune Burns intended”.

(**M-1** is closely related to M1 and was the tune widely known as “Auld Lang Syne” in the eighteenth century, and also used for a number of related songs from the eighteenth century onwards. This tune will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.)



Fig. 1.4 Tune M1, based here on the version printed in vol. V of the *Scots Musical Museum* transposed from D to C and with minor changes to the rhythm. Set by author using MuseScore (2021).

**Audio example 1.**

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/e67100a5>



M2 is the tune that became associated with the song following its publication with Burns's words in George Thomson's *Select Collection*. This is the tune most commonly associated with the song today, and the tune that we will be dealing with almost exclusively from Chapters 4 to 10. The example is notated here from memory.



Fig. 1.5 Tune M2, basic tune from author's oral memory.³¹ Set by author using MuseScore (2021).

**Audio example 2.**

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/f9e46c97>



M3 is the tune introduced more recently by the Tannahill Weavers and sung by Eddi Reader at the opening of the new Scottish Parliament building in 2004. This tune will be discussed at the very end of this book, in Chapter 12.



Fig. 1.6 Tune M3, based on the Tannahill Weaver's recording.³² Set by author using MuseScore (2021).

31 The tune as published by Thomson has some slight differences in terms of rhythmic emphasis from the tune as it is broadly used today—hence my opting for a more modern rendering here.

32 The Tannahill Weaver's rendition is fluid, with some variations between verses: I have standardized and slightly simplified this for the purposes of this example.

**Audio example 3.**

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/8f8589f3>



In order to keep things simple, minor variations on these tunes will be assimilated into the main complexes, unless there are good reasons for not doing so. In other words, there are generally slight rhythmic or melodic variations between printed versions of M2, but as long as the tune can be recognized as M2, this is the term used to refer to all of them.

The Words

Burns left several versions of *Auld Lang Syne*: those that are still available are given in Appendix 2, and numbered **B1-B5**. The most important of these are **B2** and **B4**, being the texts as published by, respectively, James Johnson in 1796 and George Thomson in 1799. The main difference between B2 and B4 is the order of the verses. B4 was the most common version in the nineteenth century, while twentieth-century editions and many more recent versions have favoured B2. Again, versions of the text in later publications show any number of mostly minor variations, which are only highlighted when they are significant.

The Traditions

S_∞ is the tradition of singing the song in a circle, with joined (crossed) arms.

S_Ω is the tradition of singing the song at the end of gatherings—and related to this, the use of the song as a song of parting.

S_{NY} is the tradition of singing the song at New Year.

Other aspects of the phenomenon *Auld Lang Syne* include the iconography of the song and references to, in particular, “auld lang syne” and “auld acquaintance” in speech and literature. These will be discussed in Chapters 4, 7, and 10 in particular.

Any instance of these phenomena can be analyzed to see what relationship, however tangential, it has to the rest. The emphasis is on the social processes in which songs and singing play a role, and the significance which the song accumulates for different groups. In this sense, the question of what is “correct” or “authentic” is, to a certain extent, irrelevant. Having said this, the reasons why a song becomes integral to a particular social practice may—patently—have to do with certain elements within the song, whilst certain contradictory elements will be ignored. It is a complex process, but all the more fascinating and revealing because of this. Elements of it seem random; others seem—once we have the benefit of comparison with others—quite predictable. Tracing how this happens is fraught with difficulties when we are dealing with practices

which go back over hundreds of years, and which may be only casually recorded if at all. But here, conversely, the popularity of *Auld Lang Syne* is a great assistance to us, and it is to this particular history that we now turn.