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## Selling Songs: Dutch results and Experiments

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B • A • S • I • S

Ballads and Songs – International Studies

Volume 6

**From “Wunderhorn” to the Internet:**

Perspectives on Conceptions of “Folk Song”  
and the Editing of Traditional Songs

**Vom „Wunderhorn“ zum Internet:**

Perspektiven des „Volkslied“-Begriffes  
und der Edition populärer Lieder

Edited by

Eckhard John and Tobias Widmaier

 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

**Eckhard John, Tobias Widmaier (Eds.):**

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## Selling Songs: Dutch Results and Experiments

There is a story about a Dutchman taking part in an international gathering. During an informal meeting all participants sing a song from their country – except the Dutchman: he is ashamed of his voice and he does not know suitable songs, so he keeps silent. The story is told by different scholars about different conferences, over and again. This is just one example of what I call the Dutch Negative Musical Self-Image: the Dutch regard themselves as a nation of tradesmen, sober; they don't have emotions, or at least don't like to show them; they cannot sing; they are an unmusical people. The Dutch haven't had great composers, only Jan Pietersz Sweelinck, four hundred years ago, whose music can only rarely be heard in organ and choir concerts. In short: "Frisia non cantat" (Friesland does not sing).

### Frisia non cantat

"Frisia non cantat" sounds like a phrase from Tacitus or Julius Caesar. Frisia stands for Friesland, which nowadays is a rural province in the north of the Netherlands; but in prehistoric times it comprised more or less the whole area of what is now the Netherlands, and, according to the Romans, the prehistoric ancestors of the Dutch people did not sing. Unfortunately, the quotation seems to be a late 18th century fake,<sup>1</sup> which illustrates perfectly the negative musical self-image of the Dutch from that period. After the golden 17th century the country underwent an 18th century of economic decline. This was caused by a moral decline of the common people, many thought. This analysis resulted in what is called the civic civilization offensive of the late 18th century. One of the means to civilize the common people was writing songs for them, full of civic virtues, which were often called "volksliederen". It is interesting to see how, shortly after Johann Gottfried Herder introduced the word "Volkslied" (1773), the Dutch chose a completely different interpretation. For authors as J. H. Swildens, Betje Wolff, and Aagje Deken, "volksliederen" were songs through which one could teach the common people civic and other virtues.<sup>2</sup> Herder's romantic concept of "Volkslied" did not evoke much interest in Holland, and only few people seem to have been aware of it.

<sup>1</sup> The provenance of the expression (which in full is "Frisia non cantat sed ratiocinatur") never has been found (see Wennekes).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the song collections called *Volks-liedjens*, published by the Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen (Society for Public Welfare) in 1789-1791 and 1806, or the *Economische liedjes* written by Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken (1781). For this "song offensive", see Mijnhardt; for the Dutch civic civilization offensive in general, see Kloek/Mijnhardt.

For the study of balladry, this had serious consequences. In 19th century Holland, practically no literary or musical fieldwork was carried out. The interest in folk song was limited to songs from written historical sources, especially from the 16th century, and to children's songs. In this respect, the Netherlands were quite different from Flanders. There, in the middle of the 19th century important song collections were published, like those of Jan-Frans Willems and Edmond de Coussemaker. Of course, the political situation was different. In Flanders the Flemish language, and consequently Flemish ballads, were important instruments in defining the Flemish people, who lived in a country dominated by a French-speaking elite. In contrast, the northern Netherlands were an independent kingdom, rather self-satisfied and sluggish, a country where everything happened fifty years later than elsewhere, including the end of the world – as the expression goes.<sup>3</sup>

For the study of ballads, this was more than true. There was nothing like a Dutch *Wunderhorn* and nobody like a Dutch Ludwig Erk. Fieldwork started as late as the early 20th century, when Jaap Kunst visited the island of Terschelling and played on his violin, together with local musicians (Kunst). Later Jaap Kunst went to what is nowadays Indonesia, and became a leading ethnomusicologist.

Nevertheless, in the 20th century the Netherlands also had their socialist, Catholic, and Protestant youth movements, in which the singing of folk songs played a central role. In the 1950s the Nederlands Volksliedarchief (Dutch Folk Song Archive) was founded, inspired by the Deutsches Volksliedarchiv in Freiburg. On top of that, in the late 1950s Ate Doornbosch started his radio programme "Onder de groene linde" (Under the Green Linden), with field recordings of old people singing ballads. Doornbosch had hundreds of thousands of listeners, many of whom wrote to him to say that they knew more songs or other versions. He visited them, recorded them, broadcasted them, and so on. After having broadcast his programme for 36 years, Doornbosch had collected about 5,000 recordings of folk songs, predominantly ballads. An important collection, indeed, but very late for Ate Doornbosch's favourite genre – ballads.

What I want to make clear in this introduction is that there is something of a persistent negative Dutch musical, and particularly vocal, self-image, and that there may be a connection between this and the late start of the study of folk song in the Netherlands. This makes folk song a difficult product to sell there, if I may express myself in marketing terms, although there has been a lot of singing, and there still is. The Dutch are just not proud of it.

<sup>3</sup> Usually, the Dutch ascribe this *bon mot* to Heinrich Heine. However, it seems to be an adaptation by the Dutch/German journalist Frits Kief (1908-1976) of Bismarck's similar *bon mot* about Mecklenburg (Beelen).

### Selling songs at the Meertens Institute

This brings us to the central question: how to “sell” a heritage of songs to a nation that believes it cannot sing? I will mention here some of the projects undertaken in recent years at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam, where the former Dutch Folk Song Archive and the collection of Ate Doornbosch are located. When, after studying for a PhD in musicology, I started my work at the Meertens Institute in 1990, the Dutch Folk Song Archive had already outlived itself. It had become part of the *Volkskunde* department (now the Research Group for Dutch Ethnology), which actually wanted to get rid of it. My new colleagues more or less forbade me to pronounce the word “*Volkslied*”: it was regarded as old-fashioned, vague, unscholarly, even “dirty”. So I redefined my subject as “song culture”: “song” because it was wider than “folk song”, without too much ideological load; and “culture” because it referred to the context and fitted better into the concept and goals of ethnology. But by using “song culture” instead of “singing culture”, I still suggested interest in the literary and musical objects, and the need for documentation of these, for a database for songs. To fill the database, I had limited means: one half-time collaborator. So we had to work with trainees and to organize financial support.

I will not report too much about the scholarly projects themselves, but rather about the way in which we try to evoke interest in them among the public – the general public as well as the academic world, which is an indispensable audience for our research results. In other words: how can one legitimize the study of ballads, or rather song culture, for our colleagues from other disciplines and for the general public – in short for the society we live in?

### “Nederlandse Liederbank”

First, I have to say something about the documentary heart of all Meertens projects: the “Nederlandse Liederbank” ([www.liederbank.nl](http://www.liederbank.nl)), i.e. the Dutch Song Database; or rather Database of Dutch and Flemish Songs, as the expression “Nederlands lied” refers to the common language called “Nederlands”, which comprises both the Dutch and Flemish variants. But on the site (which includes an English interface), it is called simply Dutch Song Database. This database comprises:

- (1) all medieval songs, from manuscripts and printed song books until 1600, from both south and north – about 11,000 records.
- (2) many 17th century songs, especially from song books printed in Holland, but also including many Flemish songs which have been added recently by the University of Antwerp – 26,500 songs.
- (3) 15,000 broadside ballads, from the Wouters & Moormann collections in the Royal Library in The Hague, and the Meertens Institute.
- (4) 11,000 field recordings, by Ate Doornbosch and other fieldworkers (about 7,500 items), including songs notated in letters by the singers.

- (5) 63,000 records from the card files from the *Nederlands Volksliedarchief* – from the Middle Ages until the 19th century, in the beginning with a very wide scope and ending with just folk songs.

The total number of records is about 127,500 references to song texts or melodies.<sup>4</sup> We are in the process of including more collections, but this is roughly the vocal heritage we try to “sell” to the Dutch community. Or rather, we try to make people aware of this heritage.

An important quality of this database is that it has a guaranteed future of at least five years, probably ten years, and possibly more. In this world of digital decline this is about the maximum for which one can hope. However, we are in discussions with and/or participating in national programmes for digitization, which address the problems of digital longevity, such as “*Het geheugen van Nederland*” (The Memory of the Netherlands) and *DANS* (Digital Archiving and Networked Services).

### Camerata Trajectina

When I began my research job at the Meertens Institute, in 1990, I brought the database with me from Utrecht University where I had studied for my PhD; it still had only some 5,000 records, and nobody had ever thought of either digital decline or digital longevity. I was still promoting interest in songs, in particular songs from the Dutch golden age, the 17th century. It was very helpful that I played the lute in *Camerata Trajectina*. This is an early music group specializing in early music from the Low Countries, from the Middle Ages until the beginning of the 18th century. We prefer music in the Dutch language, art music as well as songs of all kinds. The secret of *Camerata* is that we regard ballads and songs as a form of early music and perform them like early music, with period instruments, according to the rules of historical performance practice. Thus we are able to supply music for many historical occasions where music is needed but where no classical or art music is available; for instance, the Eighty Years War – the Dutch War of Independence against Spain in the 16th century, started by William the Silent. There is practically no classical music fitting this theme, but there are hundreds of political songs that survive, the so-called “beggar songs” (*Geuzenliederen*), which sing about sieges and battles, or mock the Spanish king and the pope. Such songs provided an excellent means to enliven the solemn commemorations of the death of William the Silent – father of the fatherland

<sup>4</sup> The total number of records refers only to references: each record contains a description of one song containing incipit, refrain, tune indication, identification, strophic form, etc., and, of course, a reference to the source. Some 2,700 of these records contain complete song texts in typed-out form; 15,000 broadside ballads can be viewed as scans; 5,000 field recordings can be listened to in MP3 format, and about 3,000 musical transcriptions of field recordings are visible as scans (situation at the end of 2008).

(1584/1984) – or the Peace of Münster, in Westphalia, which ended the Eighty Years War (1648/1998).

Another example is the Dutch East India Company, which exploited what is nowadays Indonesia for more than two centuries. Its founding in 1602 was solemnly commemorated in 2002, and Camerata Trajectina performed and recorded shanties telling about storms, pirates, and the treasures of the Indies, including willing women. Recently we staged a production about the Dutch sailor Jan Jansen, who converted to Islam in order to become a better pirate, to celebrate 400 years of diplomacy between the Netherlands and Morocco.

Other projects had religious subjects, like the 500th anniversary of Menno Simons, the Frisian founder of the Mennonites, who sang thousands of songs. Also celebrated were important poets, such as Constantijn Huygens, Cornelis Pietersz Hooft, and Maria Tesselschade. For many of these themes, national commemorations were organized, with Her Majesty the Queen and everything, and Camerata Trajectina was asked to supply the music again and again. In this way, interest in and appreciation for these song repertoires arose, not only in circles of historians, and particularly literary historians (*neerlandici*), but also among the national and administrative elite. For scholars who had spent many years working on the poems of, say, the 13th century mystic Hadewijch, or the 16th century *rederijkers*, or the choruses by the 17th century playwright Hooft, it was a revelation to hear these texts sung for the first time in their lives: poems turned out to be real songs – that is to say, music – and the melodies added an unexpected emotional dimension to them. The texts usually sounded lighter than was generally assumed: high literature became functional music.

Thanks to the performances of Camerata Trajectina I could find support for scholarly research projects on song culture and repertoire, particularly from literary historians. A helpful development was that during the last two or three decades literary historians have redefined literature in a much broader sense than before, a development that made common songs – traditionally regarded as the lowest class of literature – an acceptable theme, interesting in relation to their functionality, aspects of the production, distribution, and reception of popular print, elite and popular culture, orality, gender, and so on. Another helpful development was the rising interest in early music, at a time when interest in early literature was, and still is, diminishing.

### Cooperation with literary historians

An important project in cooperation with literary historians was the *Repertory of Dutch Songs until 1600*, which I, as a musicologist, supervised together with the literary historian Frank Willaert of the University of Antwerp. This project took 7 years, with several collaborators, and resulted in a database of some 7,000 different texts and about 1,000 different melodies, described in 11,000 records, plus some tens of thou-

sands of parallel versions. The database was published on CD-Rom, together with two book volumes and a printed catalogue – with more symbolic than practical value, in my view (Bruin/Oosterman).<sup>5</sup> The CD-Rom, or rather the database, is the real thing. To raise interest, we presented the Repertory in the context of the early music festival in Utrecht, where we organized four concerts with medieval songs by different Dutch and Flemish ensembles. Something special was the inclusion of vocal recordings of all 150 Souterliedekens, the most important corpus of late medieval monody. It was the music that gave brilliance to a respectable scholarly project.

The usefulness of this catalogue was tested in a follow-up project, the re-editing of the Antwerp songbook of 1544. This is the most important collection of secular songs in the Dutch language of the late Middle Ages, reflecting the exuberant life of the metropolis. The only extant copy was discovered by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, who regarded it as the most important source for balladry in the Low Countries. The printed book itself contains the texts of 221 songs, but no music notation. Until recently, 83 melodies had been identified, but with the help of the new Repertory we could add some 25 new melodies. The edition was made by a team of four “medio-neerlandici” – historians of medieval Dutch literature – and one musicologist (*Het Antwerps Liedboek*). Again, it was the music that turned the project into something special, with a double CD on which many of the songs could be heard, interpreted by Flemish and Dutch singers from both the folk and early music scenes.<sup>6</sup>

### Cooperation with musicologists

Musicologists also appreciated the musical reconstructions of the song repertoire, although it did not fit very well into the classical history of music, which essentially is a history of classical music concerned with the development of musical style as expressed in masterpieces by great composers. I had the opportunity to offer an alternative in a project called *Een muziekgeschiedenis der Nederlanden*; that is, A Music History of the Netherlands, or rather a Music History of the Low Countries, as the book covered not only the present northern Netherlands but also the southern Netherlands and what later became Belgium, in particular Flanders (Grijp, *Een muziekgeschiedenis*). In this book I tried to integrate songs and song culture into “real” music history. We used a model of short chapters, each starting with a historically important or just picturesque moment. In total there were 126 chapters, and as editor-in-chief I was in a position to decide that half of the articles should be devoted to classical or art music and the other half to “other musics”, including popular music culture: not only rock and pop, jazz, and musicals, but also the singing of all kinds of social or religious

<sup>5</sup> Martine de Bruin presented the Repertory at the International Ballad Conference held in Hildesheim, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> The CD was awarded an Edison prize in 2006.

groups in the past and present, including folk music and the folk revival. Especially for the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the equivalent of popular music appeared to be song. There are chapters on, for example, the mystic songs of Hadewijch between Minnesänger and trouvères (13th century); music and singing of the “rederijkers” (amateur poets, members of the Chambers of Rhetoric); broadside ballads as ambulant merchandise (by Stefaan Top); the role of singing in 20th century youth movements, whether socialist, Catholic, or Protestant; the singing of psalms and canticles by orthodox Protestants in church and at home, around the harmonium; folk music and folk songs in Flanders (by Wim Bosmans); and many more. Thus, song culture was integrated – at least chronologically – into the musical history of the Low Countries.

In 2006 the project was continued with a modest addendum, covering music culture in the Low Countries during the past five years (Grijp, *Een muziekgeschiedenis. Een vervolg*). We had contributions about Moroccan-Dutch hip hop, singing contests like “Pop Idol”, and about the Dutch folk singer, as he called himself, André Hazes, who died in 2005. His funeral was a national happening, an unsurpassed media event, which took place in the Amsterdam ArenA, a soccer stadium filled with some 50,000 people, mourning, singing, shouting. Another 5 million Dutch people were watching on TV, plus one million Flemish people. Hazes’s coffin was placed on the central spot of the playing field. I admit that this is in contradiction to the negative musical self-image, of the Dutch as a non-singing nation, that I described at the beginning of this paper. Something seems to be changing. Hazes’s genre of tear-jerkers or “smartlappen”, as they are called, after the German “Schmachtfetzen”, is becoming more and more popular, even among intellectual people. They sing them in special “smartlappen” choirs, and perform them in street festivals.

### Cooperation with ethnologists

The cooperation with ethnologists has been fundamental for me, as the study of song culture is located in the Department of Dutch Ethnology of the Meertens Institute.

This is reflected in research projects that look at the function and meaning of, especially, contemporary versions of popular culture. Special issues of the ethnological journal *Volkskundig bulletin* devoted to musical language choice (“Zingen in een kleine taal” – Singing in a Small Language) and to national anthems reflect this approach. These and other projects (for example, on contemporary dialect music) elicited interest not only in relation to ethnology and related disciplines, but also from the general public. On the other hand, although “singing culture” is still regarded as one of the cornerstones of the discipline of ethnology (see Dekker/Roodenburg/Rooijackers), it is not always easy to relate these recent ethnological research questions to the building of databases for literary and musical “objects” such as songs and stories. Therefore, in 2006 two sub-divisions have been started within the Department of Ethnology, a

Dutch Song Centre and a Dutch Folk Tale Centre, where these sub-disciplines can continue their work on the documentation of the Dutch “immaterial” or “intangible” cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup>

One problem is that there are few ethnologists in the Netherlands outside of the Meertens Institute. Ethnology is scarcely taught at Dutch universities, and where it is, the chair is dependent on the Meertens Institute.<sup>8</sup> This makes it difficult to find ethnological partners for the purpose of raising external money, at least for national projects. But I must mention here an internal project financed generously by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, to which the Meertens Institute belongs. This is the digitization of the card files of the old Dutch Folk Song Archive, which was carried out by a team of eight people working half-time for three years. In this rather complicated operation they digitized some 63,000 cards. Without the grant this valuable system would have been gradually lost.

### Cooperation with libraries

Another category of professionals with whom we can cooperate is librarians. They realize that their collections represent a national heritage, and they want to safeguard them as well as to make them accessible for the public. Digitization is the keyword, in particular scanning and publishing the scans over the Internet. As far as old material is concerned, there are no problems with copyright. In 2004 we finished a database of about 7,000 broadsides, which were scanned and made available over the Internet ([www.geheugenvannederland.nl/straatliedern](http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/straatliedern); now also available through [www.liederenbank.nl](http://www.liederenbank.nl)). “We” is the Meertens Institute and the Royal Library in The Hague, which share the famous collections of D. Wouters and J. Moormann, collected in the 1930s. This project was carried out in the context of the national digitization programme The Memory of the Netherlands, which had a budget for publicity. We used that for a recording of the most popular of the songs, performed by popular singers specializing in Dutch songs, some of them quite famous.

It was amazing how well this worked, not only from an artistic point of view, but also as a publicity strategy. During the first rehearsal the national radio 1 news channel was in attendance, and dozens of interviews and performances for radio, television, and newspapers followed. Thousands of people visited the site, looking for songs they remembered from their youth. As a kind of by-product, a CD was released, followed by an anthology of the ballad texts, again with music notation (*De kist van Pierlala* 2004/2006).

<sup>7</sup> These sub-divisions are called “centres for documentation and research”. The Song Centre is directed by Louis Peter Grijp, the Folk Tale Centre by Theo Meder.

<sup>8</sup> This is true for the chair in Dutch ethnology at the University of Amsterdam, supported by the Foundation Meertens External Activities.

As a follow-up to this broadside project, a Foundation for the Heritage of Dutch Songs was founded, in which heritage institutions (as we like to call them nowadays), such as the Royal Library, the Dutch Theatre Institute, the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam University Library, the Dutch Music Institute, and others, can cooperate. The intention is to set up further, similar digitization projects.

### Education

Officially, the Meertens Institute does not have a task in education. However, since 2001 researchers may be appointed to special chairs at universities. One of these has been founded for the field of Dutch Song Culture in Past and Present, at Utrecht University, as part of the degree programme in musicology. Thus students have the opportunity to follow classes and seminars on several aspects of Dutch song culture. They use “A Music History of the Low Countries” as a textbook – and they like it: it is written in an accessible style, and the material on music from everyday life makes it accessible to them. So a generation of young Dutch musicologists is being educated with the idea that song culture is a part of the history of music.

Several doctoral theses have been, or are being, supervised.<sup>9</sup> Incidental seminars on songs have also been given by colleagues in the field of literary history, inspired by the *Repertory of Dutch Songs until 1600*. Other literary historians have acknowledged the educational possibilities of songs for lessons in literary history in high schools, and have written a textbook, accompanied by a CD with recordings by Camerata Trajectina (Gemert).

### Under the Green Linden

We are now working on a project on “Under the Green Linden”, one of the so called “golden eggs” of the Meertens Institute: the field recordings of Ate Doornbosch and others. Doornbosch had one of the longest radio programmes in Dutch radio history. It is etched into the Dutch collective memory, although many radio listeners hated it – the songs and the false singing of old broken voices – especially in the last years, when the programme was scheduled right after the opera matinee on a Sunday afternoon. It was taken off the air in 1993. During these last years of the programme, a selection of the recordings was published in three book volumes (*Onder de groene linde*).

Many years have passed since then and I think the time has become ripe for a renewal of interest in these unique testimonies to oral tradition. We have decided to make them available in several ways. One is the publishing all of the recordings on the Internet, in audio format, mainly for research purposes. The technique is not a great

<sup>9</sup> In 2004 Natascha Veldhorst defended her dissertation *De perfecte verleiding. Muzikale scènes op het Amsterdams toneel in de 17e eeuw*.

problem, the recordings are mounted in MP3 format. There might be problems with the copyright or with new privacy rules for scholarly publications: we will have to find out. For the general public interested in culture, we plan a CD boxed-set: nine audio CDs and one DVD. We follow more or less the ballad index designed decades ago by Rolf W. Brednich and others, which offers a practical order for the ballads, according to their narrative. In a seminar I asked ten musicology students each to take a part of the index, listen to all the recordings, and choose the best – that is, the most pleasant to their ears. I was surprised by their enthusiasm for the material; most of them had never heard such field recordings before. Of course, we had to check their work, and also Ate Doornbosch himself listened to all the CDs and provided comments. We plan to publish the box in 2008, with the 163 song texts also translated into English. If possible, we will also record a popular CD, such as was made for the broadsides, with contemporary interpretations of the ballads by popular singers, especially regional singers. Also, the fourth volume of the book edition of “Under the Green Linden” will be launched on this occasion.

This is my plan for “selling” Ate Doornbosch’s collection of field recordings to the general public, but to sell it to fellow scholars is another thing. Everybody seems to agree that it is a valuable part of the national heritage, an important testimony of oral culture – but practically no scholar seems to be interested in using it for his or her own research. Generally speaking, it is not always easy to define interesting research projects using material from old collections, collected with other goals and interests than modern scholarship might wish. But in the case of “Under the Green Linden” we were able to identify a beautiful research problem, arising out of the oral variation that is so characteristic of this kind of material. Actually, there are two problems. There is a theoretical problem, that of establishing a model for oral variation, both textual as well as musical. What elements are stable, and which may vary? The other problem is practical and concerns the retrieval of melodies, which is a topical subject in informatics. As of this moment, there are several computer systems that can search for melodies or music, usually based on unchanging melodies. But few can handle some amount of variation. To develop and integrate more sophisticated techniques, in 2006 a project was started, called WITCHCRAFT (What Is Topical in Cultural Heritage: Content-based Research Amongst Folk Tunes), in which the Meertens Institute as a heritage institute is cooperating with the Informatics Department of Utrecht University. Two musicologists and a scientific software engineer will be working together for four years to find solutions to this elusive problem. I hope to report about this in more detail in the near future.

### Conclusion

I realize that there is some irony in my story. When I started my work at the Meertens Institute I had to reject more or less the idea of folk song, and redefined my subject as



“song culture from the Middle Ages until the present time”, including popular music – “from Hadewijch to Hazes”.<sup>10</sup> But now, with the *Onder de groene linde* CD boxed-set and the high-tech WITCHCRAFT project, I return, like a sinner, to the “dirty” folk songs, including the good old ballads.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. the title of my inauguration speech at Utrecht University in 2002: “Van Hadewijch tot Hazes”.