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# Songs of the Pandemic

*Michael Alexander Ulfstjerne*

**Abstract:** This article explores virtual common singing in the time of partial lockdown in Denmark through an auto-ethnographic account. The phenomenon of singing together on Danish public service television gained immense popularity as a response to the pandemic as one-fifth of the population tuned in, in many cases broadcasting themselves while signing. Looking at common singing as an emergent 'infrastructure for troubling times', this article takes up questions of digitally mediated intimacy during the COVID-19 lockdown, exploring who sings, what is sung, and the affective responses (tears, feelings of intimacy, ambivalence) to the singing. More than merely reviving vernacular singing traditions, the article argues, this new-found sonic comradery forms not only an affective infrastructure that moves people to tears but also somatic building blocks for national imageries.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark, infrastructure, intimacy, nationalism, tears, virtual common singing

I am trying my best to hide my tears. I do not want my eight-year-old son and my wife to notice me this way. But nonetheless, I am sobbing away. I do so as quietly as I can, but I am still audible. It is Friday, and a surprisingly large number of Danish citizens are watching each other sing from inside their respective living rooms on prime-time flow television on DR1, a Danish public service channel. It is uncanny. Are living rooms not meant to be private? It is disorienting, and I am flat out crying for some reason that I cannot really wrap my head around.

We are in the televised company of the genuinely sympathetic talk show host, Mads Steffensen, and the rising piano-playing-choir-directing star of Danish folk songs past, Phillip Faber. The programme, *Community Singing – On One's Own* (*Fællessang, hver for sig*) translates horribly, though the title itself comes close to an early 1995 song 'Together and Apart' ('Sammen og hver for sig') by the recently deceased and loved-by-all Danish folk and rock singer Kim Larsen. And yet, the cosy living room atmosphere hinders any thought as to why the slight appropriation should be considered anything but kind. References are plentiful.

Over the last number of weeks, there has been lot of singing. We tried to emulate the Italian way. Clapping or banging on pots and pans in honour of the new class of societal heroes who are watching over our feeble and old. None of these attempts really took off, it seems. Not even the density of Copenhagen inner city neighbourhoods could make it work. It was a community mumble at best. But now, *sweet Jesus*, we found a way to make it work, albeit in a digitally mediated form. Maybe it is simply a question of the Mediterranean climate – and balconies – and maybe it is the shades of blue sky amidst Southern European rooftop vistas. In her meditation on getting lost Rebecca Solnit (2005) once observed that wedged in between solitude, desire and distance is the colour blue:

> Blue is the light that got lost. . . . This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue. . . . *The* color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. (Solnit 2005: 29)

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I am wondering whether the lockdown and the current mess we find ourselves in have finally got to me. Are these the first signs of some creeping, but apparently benign, form of mental collapse? Did something in there break? While I have been known to be emotionally susceptible to singing contests on flow television, there is something unfamiliar and inherently ambiguous at play here.

Why tears, why now? This is my primary concern here. Related to this is my recent interest in the less spectacular effects of social distancing and intimacy in the time of the pandemic: things that creep up on us and stick. Will the singing continue? The crying?

To make sense of it, I think about Lauren Berlant's (2016) recent impetus to make ambivalence a point of departure for reflection. Crisis and catastrophes have long been a powerful vector for the making of social theory. They chart a recognisable narrative that starts with a theme of structural failure, and that often includes some questionable governance and, adding to this, an interlude of reparative and emancipatory logic. It resonates neatly with abandoned streets, states of exceptions, coffins in military vehicles, curfews, wakes without people. But what if, Berlant asks, we would turn to 'scenes of genuine ambivalence' (2016: 395), for these – I take her point to be – would be more adept to portray the ways that we get along amongst each other in what she terms 'an awkward and violent ordinary' (2016: 395). While I believe Berlant wrote this in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown, it seems equally if not even more timely now.

So why would I not sob? That could be one place to begin. Well, for starters, I have never been a keen fan of anthems or flags, the overtly imposing monuments and skewed symbolisms of nation-states. And that is not all. There is an institutional bent to this. The general nature of my lengthy education as an anthropologist has safeguarded me with a heavy-hitting kit against exactly such sentiments. I am dosed with nationalist repellent. Early on, Benedict Anderson (1983) took issue with the character of national belonging that almost magically veils internal inequalities by way of some imagined 'horizontal comradeship'. Simultaneously, such 'imagined communities' transform the arbitrary into something chiselled in stone. Chance becomes destiny as peoples' places of birth determine a decidedly unequal access to entitlements and resources. A feeling of belonging is at the heart of this. Let us return to Berlant, who takes issue with the darker sides of feelings such as belonging. She writes:

> Just because we are in the room together does not mean that we belong to the room or each other . . . Belonging is a proposition, a theory, a forensic fact, and a name for a kind of attachment. The crowded but disjointed propinquity of the social calls for a proxemics, the study of sociality as proximity is quite distinct from the possessive attachment languages of belonging. (Berlant 2016: 395)

Is a different vocabulary possible? What would a shift from belonging to proxemics entail?

Or maybe, given the digitally mediated nature of common singing, *intimacy* might provide an alternative ground to think with. Intimacy has recently entered the critical vocabulary that aims to engage with how prevailing forms of relatedness, love and sexuality are entangled with late liberal ideals and aspirations (Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2006), or, more relevant to the context of the pandemic, the differential ways that intimacy and intimate relations are regulated in a population (Legg 2010; Pain 2015; Stoler 2006). Regulations span from such imperatives as 'stay inside' and 'keep the distance' to more advisory forms as in the case of 'lockdown love' as stipulated by the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment: 'If you are single during the lockdown, then why not find yourself a sex-buddy?'

This, of course, is a strange moment to study intimacy and proxemics – that is, the study of physical closeness often indexing *reasonable* and socially recognised distances between people and commonly accepted distinctions between public, private and intimate spaces. Proxemics as we know it, and we all know it (Goffman 1959, 1963), is all turned upside down. Intimacy, hugs, hands and handouts have become toxic. Physical distance, on the other hand, is sound, healthy and a sign of solidarity. Staying home, doing virtually nothing, has become a national virtue. We are constantly renegotiating proximities both in private and in public. Proxemics also structure mobility. And here the default logic is also momentarily out of order. Mobility used to be equated with privilege and immobility with stuckedness (Hage 2009; Schiller and Salazar 2013). Now, voluntary immobility is practised by those of us who have the luxury of being able to withdraw, trim our gardens, refine our sourdough, read, reflect, knit and homeschool, while others less fortunate are rendered precariously mobile with few or no safe space for retreat. Do they sing?

As proximity and intimacy are increasingly mediated by digital means (Cockayne et al. 2017), this becomes even more complex. Pandemic home videos

are uploaded on social media, and new expressive forms of humour, living-room workouts, and solidarity manifest. Music sites, singing lessons and dancing lessons are offered free of charge online. The arts are reconfigured as people share their poetry from home, celebrities read out children's books, concerts and collective mediation sessions go virtual and viral. But new intimacies also draw up lines and accentuate difference. Living rooms and what I would otherwise regard as the anti-social architectures of balconies have turned into national repositories. And we sing. The songs are transmitted by cell phones and broadcasted on flow-television in real time. We are *together and apart*. While Anderson's *community* was primarily *imagined* and made possible partly through the spread of vernacular languages and new technologies of printing, smartphones seem to have rendered this imagination obsolete, and now we are virtually visiting each other's living rooms in real time. Or, at least one-fifth of the Danish population has joined this new *sonic comradery*.

The questions of *who* sings, *what* is sung, and *how* they sing are interesting in this regard.

For logical reasons, I cannot get a proper tone out in between my sobs, teary eyes, and heavy breathing. But I am almost certain that not all people sing. Many apparently do though, and the ratings of this singing have supposedly surpassed those of the popular Danish X-Factor show broadcast on another channel in the same time slot. Popular artists revisit their earlier work or cover yet other artists' early hit songs. Random families or couples sing while broadcasting themselves – in and out of tune. From a certain vantage point, everything is recognisable: nothing out the ordinary, nothing experimental or anything remotely foreign is allowed inside. Well, that is not entirely true. A few artists of Greenlandic decent or from the Kingdom of Denmark's now autonomous region of Faroe Islands are allowed in – and they sing in Danish of course.

Coming together in a time of a pandemic is not a Danish phenomenon. It is pretty much everywhere, although it takes different forms and shapes. An English national working in Denmark during the partial COVID-19 lockdown recently remarked the lack of irony when we sing. In the United Kingdom, he observed, people would sing as well, but there would always be something, a smile, an irony, a distance. I imagine how the dispersed but orchestrated living-room sentimentalism must seem odd to those who are in Denmark for work, education, refuge, love or other reasons. Or maybe not. But for most, it would be inaccessible given the narrow loop of references, sharply drawn up along the lines of a defined language community. Nobody does the Ketchup Song (Las Ketchup, 2002) or a new riff – even the Beatles are left outside.

But does this merely bring out what is there already, latent, or does it also change or add something? The Songbook of the Danish adult folk high schools has reached best-seller status. This would have been unthinkable a few months back. A particular heritage has resurfaced for younger generations. In Denmark, common singing plays a formative role in collective identity through schooling, associational life, social gatherings and holidays. The nation is more than a political, economic or ideological entity: it is also a somatic one (Ramaswamy 1998), where bodily fluids such as blood, milk, sweat and tears speak directly to the imaginedness of national communities. The Songbook's repertoire, however, is not fixed but undergoes continuous revision. A central part of its pedigree is derived from the turbulent history of the Danish-German border region, from which is derived songs with more militant and nationalist prose, some of which are slowly effaced year by year while new songs are added. The resurfacing of the Songbook has many merits. I agree. But rituals or the revitalisation of tradition do more than bring out what is there. They move, they become infrastructures, they point ahead. This did not go unnoticed. The Scientific Counsel in Denmark has recently financed a project meant to explore how we can build off the experiences of the 'virtual common singing' in the design of other rituals. Particularly, the younger generations 'feel lonely', researchers point out, and could maybe need some 'replacement rituals'. I am sure they could. They have also proved less inclined to follow stipulated COVID-19 measures or to keep the mandated distance.

The imperative of so-called 'social distancing', already a misnomer for what should rather be termed 'physical distancing', easily slips into different logics of distancing in ways that are rarely addressed. Could social distancing morph into national, generational or even ethnic distancing? Should we share surplus medical and safety supplies with Italian citizens? Where does solidarity start and stop?

I am not saying that we should not sing. Obviously, it does something for me. But the ambiguity is striking, and I wonder how and whether we could find, complement or build off of a different kind of heritage – or, at least critically consider the contents of a future one. This is not to revive or applaud some utopian ideals of cosmopolitanism in a borderless world.

**Figure 1.** The national flag of Denmark on pavement. Photo courtesy of the author.

So why the crying then? From a cursory reading of studies on the topic, it seems that tears, at least in comparison to other bodily secretions, are understudied (Vingerhoets and Bylsma 2015). The mechanics, however, appear broadly agreed upon in the literature. When crying for emotional reasons, your limbic system signals the brain's communication centre (the Pons), which then passes on the message to the lacrimal system, which in turn produces the tears. Most of us do it. And whether we like it or not, crying is part of our basic design. Contrary to 'lacrimation', which is the non-emotional crying kind, our more emotionally charged tears seem to come with a bonus: leu-enkephalin, a mild opiate that exists in the brains of quite a few animals and humans. This seems to suggest that my brain responded to common singing by sedating me, and, because it did so with an opiate, by leaving me with a mild high after the sob. While this offers me some solace, or sedation at least, it does not really help me grasp what the point of it all is.

There seems to be a broad agreement amongst scientists that tears serve the purpose of social bonding, incentivising some helpful behaviour by non-verbal means (Vingerhoets and Bylsma 2015). They may have derived from a more primal holler of 'help!' and are also often related to infants' means of maintaining the proximity of the parent. Similar to collective rituals like singing and praying, crying solidifies social relations; it stimulates a sense of connectedness, especially in times of adversity (Vingerhoets 2013). Tears are also gendered, both in terms of how male and female tears are perceived and tabooed and in terms of how they translate into national imageries of loss and longing (Ramaswamy 1998). However, as argued by some researchers, there may also be chemical differences. A study by neurobiologist Noam Sobel (2017) observed that women's tears contain pheromones that lower the testosterone levels of males in the vicinity. Sobel has even thought out a clever way to speed-freeze and deposit tears into a tear bank offering samples for researchers around the world. I am wondering whether I should offer mine for his cryogenic repository. I can imagine a label: *pandemic singing lacrimas, male, 40y, Denmark.*

I am drifting, but at least it seems that crying is a design that involves a set of immediate and active effects: they sedate, they do gendered things, they holler, they bond, they become somatic building blocks for imagined communities, and they seep through or into things. They are near and work by proximity and contagion.

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