

Sängerfests – The Festivals of German-American Singing Societies

Antje Petty

“Though much is being talked and written about the German national festivals just now, especially about the Saengerfest in this city, nobody but the Germans themselves seem to understand the nature and character of these festivities.”

Thus remarked the *New York Herald* on July 18, 1865, in the midst of the ninth singing festival organized by the *Nordöstlicher Sängerbund* (Singing Society of the Northeast), held July 15–20, 1865, in New York City. Thirty-four clubs from New York and fifty more from surrounding states participated in the event, bringing over 2,300 German-singing participants—most members of *Männerchors* (choirs for male voices)—and several thousand visitors to the city. Festival days were filled with concerts, parades, singing competitions, speeches, and social gatherings. The last day featured a grand procession along Broadway, followed by what the *New York Times* called a “monster picnic at Jones Wood.”¹

The 1865 New York City *Sängerfest* was by no means unique. From the first such festival in Cincinnati in 1849, they were held all over the United States, culminating in many even larger events by the turn of the century. But what was their nature, character, and history?

The first American *Männerchor* was founded by German-speaking immigrants in Philadelphia in 1835. Two

years later, the Baltimore *Liederkrantz* was founded, and in 1838, it became the first German-American singing society to admit women singers to form a mixed voice choir. With more immigrants arriving in the late 1840s and early 1850s, new singing societies popped up in German communities across the country. Suzanne Snyder, in her extensive study of the German-American *Männerchor* phenomenon,² counts 950 German-American male choirs between 1835 and 1960. Some had few members and were short-lived, others are still in existence today, such as the Madison (Wis.) *Männerchor*.³

New York City’s first singing society was the *Liederkrantz*, founded in 1847. That same year, the *Männerquartett*

and the *Sozialer Männerverein* were formed in Milwaukee; they soon merged into the *Milwaukee Männerchor*. Other singing societies followed, such as the “Singing Club of German Workers” (1848), the highly trained choir of Milwaukee’s *Musikverein* (1850), and the “Singers of the Free-thinker Congregation” (1852).

Not all members sang. Some dues-paying members did not perform music, but they attended and helped organize performances and other social events, including picnics, balls, and summer excursions.

While all groups shared a love for singing German songs, there were distinct differences between them. As Christopher G. Ogburn points out,⁴ factors such as regional affiliation,



Greeting from the *Nordstern* newspaper to participants of the 1908 *Sängerfest* held in La Crosse, Wisconsin, “the birthplace of the Singing Association of the Northwest.”

social consciousness, and economic status often predicated society membership. In New York City, for example, the *Liederkrantz* and the *Arion* charged substantial membership fees, soon becoming clubs for the city's German-American elites, with members including William Steinway (scion of the famous piano factory), Carl Schurz (U.S. senator and Secretary of the Interior), and Oswald Ottendorfer (editor of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*).

Another difference between the singing clubs was the musical training of their members, and thus the repertoires they practiced. For some groups the main purpose was to meet and sing together. They preferred arrangements of well-known tunes and folk songs. Other clubs had professional soloists among their members and performed challenging pieces from classical works.

But all enjoyed visiting with other groups to sing. The first regional singing association, the *Nordamerikanischer Sängerbund*, was founded in Cincinnati in 1849; its first American *Sängerfest* took place the same year in that city. The *Nordöstlicher Sängerbund*, founded in Philadelphia in 1850, brought together German-American choirs from the Eastern seaboard.

The *Sängerbund des Nordwestens* (Singing Association of the Northwest), founded in La Crosse in 1866, was the first in the Upper Midwest. At the time, it had seven member groups hailing from La Crosse, Watertown, Portage, Bangor, and Waumandee, Wisconsin; as well as Brownsville in Minnesota and Lansing in Iowa. Their first *Sängerfest* was held in La Crosse in July 1866. In the following years,



Delegations from German-American singing societies march in the 10th *Deutsche Sängerbundfest* parade, Vienna, 1928

Source: Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Wikimedia, Bild 102-06270

the *Sängerbund* expanded steadily until by the time of its 15th *Sängerfest*, held July 8–12, 1891, in Milwaukee, the association had swelled to 42 participating singing societies with thousands of singers.⁵ A special “Milwaukee Festival Choir” was created consisting of nearly 1,000 members from Milwaukee singing societies, and over 2,000 children “from public schools” formed the “Milwaukee Children’s Choir.” A special “Festival Orchestra” and famous soloists like Marie Ritter-Goetze rounded out the musical offerings. The concerts had “grand choirs” of up to 2,000 singers on stage and about 4,000 people in the audience. Musical selections ranged from famous opera choirs to traditional German folk songs, and compositions by German-American composers especially written for these grand choirs, including several by Milwaukee’s own Hugo Kaun.

At some festivals, especially those organized by the Singing Association of the Northeast, singing contests were popular. Participating choirs,

except those from the hosting city, competed for increasingly valuable prizes, such as grand pianos.

These singing events existed in the context of other German-American festival traditions, like the *Turnfests* organized by German-American gymnast clubs, or *Schützenfests* organized by sport-shooting clubs. As expressions of the *Vereinskultur* (club culture) that German-speaking immigrants brought with them, *Sängerfests* served not only as opportunities to show off skills, but also to meet, to speak German, and to recreate a sense of *Heimat*. They also allowed the German-American community to showcase German traditions and (musical) accomplishments—sometimes with a touch of cultural superiority—to their fellow Americans.

While in many cities the larger population watched *Sängerfest* processions and parades, the concerts were mostly attended by German Americans. Some non-German citizens welcomed the influx of the singers and out-of-town guests, if only for economic reasons;

others were not so enamored. Some voiced unhappiness about festivals taking place on Sundays, and decried the consumption of alcohol, reinforcing stereotypes about German Americans. Others questioned the patriotism of fellow citizens who insisted on singing only in German. A day after the 1865 *Sängerfest* in New York, for example, the *New York Times* wrote, “There is no use in disguising the fact. Yesterday was a grand old drink for one and all. [...] Song and mirthfulness characterized the entire proceedings. [...] There have been a few mistakes. [...] They omitted to open their master picnic with the ‘Star Spangled Banner,’ which would have been in eminent good taste—and, perhaps, some of our friends in their anxiety to have a good time, forgot that there was anybody else in the city beside themselves; but what are these little forgetfulnesses and mistakes in a festival extending through five mortal days?”⁶

Organizing the large festivals was a herculean task, logistically and financially, and the events did not always turn out as planned. A regional *Sängerfest* in Chicago in 1857 was completely rained out, and many large singing festivals ended in financial loss, including the 1891 *Sängerfest* in Milwaukee. The *Manitowoc* [Wisconsin] *Pilot* reported that “[t]he Saengerfest in Milwaukee last week was a financial failure, and the committee is having an interesting time trying to adjust matters properly.”⁷

All the while, German-American singing societies kept strong connections with singers in German-speaking Europe. If they could afford it, choirs even traveled across the Atlantic to participate in each other’s

festivals.

As times changed, the singing associations had to adapt. No festivals were held during the Civil War years, with the 1865 *Sängerfest* in New York being the first to take place after the war. At that time it stood out for inviting German choirs from Virginia. No festivals were held after the United States entered the First World War, until the Chicago *Sängerfest* in 1924, nor did any occur during the Second World War. In the second half of the 20th century, the number of German singing societies and their membership declined drastically. Their repertoire shrank, too, focusing on popular songs about the beauty of nature and (European) locales, a longing for *Heimat*, Christmas carols, and social and drinking songs.

In the 21st century, the number of singing societies with a German-American origin has remained stable, with membership rising in some cases. National *Sängerfests* are still held every three years, and Milwaukee hosted one in 2013. The Wisconsin chapter of the North American Singing Association currently has six member choruses: *Concordia Gesangverein* Sheboygan, *Freier Sängerbund* Manitowoc, Madison *Männerchor*, *MGV Harmonia* Kenosha, Milwaukee *D.A.N.K. Chor*, and

the Milwaukee *Liederkrantz*. However, many society members do not speak German, and some choirs now include a repertoire of English-language songs. Still bearing their original German names, today’s singing societies not only reflect their German-American heritage, but have become part of a broader local and regional culture that in itself is uniquely American. 

From June 8 to 11, 2023, the 64th National *Sängerfest* of the *Nord-Amerikanischer Sängerbund* will be held in Madison, Wisconsin (see: <https://na-saengerbund.org/saengerfest-2023>). In conjunction, the Max Kade Institute will curate a special exhibit, April 3–June 30, 2023, showcasing materials from our own collections and those of the Mills Music Library at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. On April 4, there will be a virtual lecture by Prof. Heike Bungert titled “‘Wo man singt.’ German-American Singing Festivals, 1849–1914.” For details, see page 13.

NOTE

The following texts have been quoted and consulted. A special *thank you* to Geoffrey M. Kroening, Secretary of the Wisconsin *Sängerbezirk* for information on the history of Wisconsin’s singing societies.

¹ “The German Saengerfest. Proceedings of the Last Day,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1865.

² Snyder, Suzanne Gail. “The Männerchor

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folk painting) by local artist Janeen Babler, who honed her craft in Switzerland.

Over the years, many prominent Americans visited Monroe Turner Hall, including Susan B. Anthony, William Jennings Bryan, John F. Kennedy, and—from the entertainment world—Wayne King, Tiny Hill, and Lawrence Welk.

Today, the Old-World Ratskeller restaurant at Turner Hall and the recently restored grand hall and stage serve local and regional communities. Run largely by volunteers and local sponsors, the Swiss Heritage Series offers regular events such as Squeezebox Night, the Monroe Swiss Singers' Swissfest, and Alpine Candle Tree-Lighting and Carol Singing, to name a few. For a list of events and a detailed history of the building go to <http://www.turnerhallofmonroe.org/>.

Whether your interest is in immigration history, architecture, preserving old-world traditions, or just good cheese and beer, we know you will enjoy your visit to Monroe for the Annual Meeting of the Friends of Max Kade on May 6, 2023. 

Hans Bernet, a resident of Monroe, is a longtime member of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute and a former member of the Board of Directors. He is the son of Swiss immigrants from the Berner Oberland near Interlaken. His mother, Martha Bernet, broadcast a daily program of Swiss and German folk music for 60 years over WEKZ in Monroe.

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Tradition in the United States: A Historical Analysis of Its Contribution to American Musical Culture." The University of Iowa, 1991.

³ For a history of the Madison *Männerchor* see an article by Günther Ruch in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of the Max Kade Institute Newsletter: <https://mki.wisc.edu/mki-newsletter/>

⁴ Ogburn, Christopher G. "Brews, Brotherhood, and Beethoven: The 1865 New York City *Sängerfest* and the Fostering of German American Identity." *American Music* 33.4 (2015): 405–440.

⁵ *Souvenir des 15. Sängesfestes des Sängerbundes des Nordwesten*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1891.

⁶ "The Saengerfest. The Last Scene of the Last Day," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1865.

⁷ *Manitowoc Pilot*, July 30, 1891.

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