

*Danish Street Cries. A study of their musical structure and a complete édition of tunes with words collected before 1960.* Vagn HOLMBOE Acta Ethnomusicologica Danica 5. Danish Folklore Archives, Skrifter 6. Copenhagen: Forlaget Kragen ApS, 1988. Danish summary. 171 pp. ISBN 78-980636-9-3.

David Buchan

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081666ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081666ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Buchan, D. (1990). Compte rendu de [*Danish Street Cries. A study of their musical structure and a complete édition of tunes with words collected before 1960.* Vagn HOLMBOE Acta Ethnomusicologica Danica 5. Danish Folklore Archives, Skrifter 6. Copenhagen: Forlaget Kragen ApS, 1988. Danish summary. 171 pp. ISBN 78-980636-9-3.] *Ethnologies*, 12(1), 119–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081666ar>

---

## Review/Compte rendu

---

# Danish Street Cries. A study of their musical structure and a complete edition of tunes with words collected before 1960.

---

Vagn HOLMBOE

Acta Ethnomusicologica Danica 5.

Danish Folklore Archives, Skrifter 6.

Copenhagen: Forlaget Kragen ApS, 1988. Danish summary. 171 pp. ISBN 78-980636-9-3.

With an accompanying cassette: *Her'er sild, Danske gåderab optaget i perioden 1935-1987* (Kragen DFS K 103) [Herring here, Danish street cries recorded 1935-1987], produced by Svend Nielsen of the Dansk Folkemindesamling.

This volume is one of a kind. Nowhere else in English, to my knowledge, does there exist a book which surveys and analyses all the recorded street cry tradition in one national culture and provides a detailed musical transcription of each item in the repertoire. The author is Vagn Holmboe, now a well-known composer, who, after finishing his student days at the Academy of Music, spent a year in Romania recording the music of the Transylvanian shepherds, and then returned to Copenhagen, where during the years 1935-1940 he collected intensively the cries of the urban hawkers.

The 242 cries recorded at that time form the core of the corpus, and are supplemented by other Copenhagen street cries from the period 1860-1935 and by street cries from Danish provincial towns (1880-1967). From his analysis he is able to declare definitively:

The street cry is a recitativic form of music which has originated from the cry and...strident speech. It arises gradually or spontane-

ously from the spoken language when the voice is allowed to dwell on the vowels of the words, and it becomes manifest in elementary recitations which may be divided into three types: the prototypes.

Out of these types, a number of formulas have arisen; they are fairly alike all over the country, and they may be used, with improvisations, for the selling of wares. The fixed formulas may develop into melodic motifs which in several cases rest on a tradition more than a hundred years old, and the melodic motifs show dialectal differences, especially between Copenhagen and the provincial towns in Jutland.

The tradition shows some influence of Gregorian plainsong, and in the nineteenth century displays "several traces of ballad-like structures" which leads to the cautious suggestion "that these few examples are rudiments of an earlier tradition of ballad-singing mixed with the ordinary street cries".

The social context receives due attention. In the 1930s all the hawkers, apart from two women, were men, a reversal from previous decades when women predominated. The change came about through the economic conditions of the Depression. These conditions added one extra difficulty for the fieldworker for when he approached the hawkers to establish biographical and contextual data, many who were unable to afford the licence thought he was a government spy and refused to provide any information. A number of informants did, however, declare to Holmboe that the "new" vendor faced a stark choice: he either learned how to "sing" out his wares or, having seriously injured his voice, had to give up the job altogether. After 1940 the tradition fell into a severe decline, but in the 1980s there were flickering signs of an incipient revival (represented in a four-item appendix). As Svend Nielsen says in the Preface: "If the book had been published in the 1940s it would presumably have given a great impetus to the study of street cries on a European scale and inspired others to make transcriptions or sound recordings of the street cry tradition in other European cities while this tradition was still flourishing." It is a genuine case of "last gleanings".

The book contains some interesting photographs and illustrations; my only cavil is that some of the bibliographical references are incomplete. It is accompanied by a fascinating cassette, *Her'er sild*, on which my favourite is the cry for "Rejer" (shrimps) that utilises the melody of "Daisy Bell".

David BUCHAN  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland