CHAPTER 7

National Art and Local Sociability
_Dutch Male Choral Societies in the Nineteenth Century_

_Jozef Vos_

Here croons the _Amstel choir_, there three _Euterpes_ cheer, _Eutonia_, at rest, is tuning throat and ear, While all _Cecilia’s_ powers are at work…¹

_Liedertafels_ are among the most widely discussed musical phenomena of the nineteenth century. These male choral societies made a significant contribution to the revival of Dutch musical life.² In addition, the many groups with names like Apollo, Amphion, or Orpheus performed regularly in a distinctly national setting. In the sixty years from 1853 to 1913, some twenty-five Dutch National Songfests were organized, each lasting for several days. The significance of such large public gatherings has been the subject of a number of studies, among them Mona Ozouf’s well-known volume on the festiveness of the French Revolution, and, closer to home, Frans Grijzenhout’s dissertation about Patriotic and Batavian festivities. Both scholars were inspired by anthropology, which possesses a vast expertise concerning the social and cultural significance of celebrations. Anthropology teaches us, here in the words of the American social scientist John MacAloon, that “cultural performances…are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.”³ German research on the culture of public celebration also acknowledges the importance of studying the ways in which collective myths and histories are enacted.⁴ In France and the Netherlands as well as Germany,

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² Heydenrijk (1861), 3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.
³ Reeser (1986), 21. The original name _Liedertafel_ came in the course of the century to be increasingly associated with social functions. To place greater emphasis on their artistic pretentions, many _Liedertafels_ changed their names to "male choral societies."
⁴ MacAloon (1984), 1.
⁵ See for example Düding, ed. (1988) and Schneider (1995).
such festive public gatherings have also been studied in relation to the process of modern state formation.

In this essay I wish to consider the national orientation of Dutch choral societies in greater detail. First I shall offer a general sketch of the rise of male choral societies in the Netherlands, and then trace their specifically national aspects by examining the nature of their disagreements about the kinds of songs to be sung at the annual Dutch National Songfests. I conclude by considering various aspects of male choral societies from the perspective of studies of nineteenth-century sociability.

The Rise of Dutch Choral Societies in the Nineteenth Century: Two Generations

Insofar as literature has concerned itself with the origins of nineteenth-century choral societies in the Netherlands, all the sources agree that the Liedertafels were imported from Germany. Invented in Prussia soon after 1800 in the form of distinguished societies of composers, musicians, and poets, the Liedertafels soon became popular among the middle classes. In South Germany and in Switzerland, where they became part of the pedagogical program of Nägeli, the Liedertafels were more middlebrow in character from the beginning. That the Liedertafels and male choral societies were imported from Germany we also know from the articles of Florentius Cornelis Kist (1796–1863) in the musical journal Caecilia. According to Kist, at that time one of the foremost authorities on Dutch musical life, the organization of the Liedertafels and the holding of songfests could only be seen as “mimicry of what our artistic neighbors the Germans are doing.” In the Netherlands people kept up with these developments “either by reading German newspapers or by going to their festivals.”

The earliest known Dutch Liedertafel was set up in Dordrecht in 1827 by Anthonie Kist Ewz., a brother of F.C. Kist. Known as ‘Aurora,’ this group remained active until around 1840. Between 1827 and 1915, nearly five hundred male choral societies were established in the Netherlands. Some existed only briefly, but a larger number remained active for decades. Some sixty male choral societies established before 1915 were still active in the 1990s. The phenomenon of the Liedertafel arrived first in the major cities, in the west of

5 Kist (1852), 211.
6 These remarks are based on evidence gathered from sources such as the membership lists of the Royal Dutch Singers Association, memorial books, programs of song competitions, musical almanacs, and studies of local and regional musical life. See also Vos, Rapport betreffende