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All my neighbors are named Johann.

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All My Neighbors are Named Johann

LARRY WARKENTIN

Immigrant Songs of Laughter and Tears is a set of six songs which I composed on texts written by Mennonite immigrants, or writers reflecting on the Mennonite immigrant experience. The songs premiered June 5 at a conference of Mennonite composers at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario. The conference brought together composers and performers with a wide range of musical styles under the title “Sound in the Land.” It was organized by Carol Weaver of the Conrad Grebel music faculty. Performing the songs were Mel Braun, baritone, and Laura Loewen, piano, from the faculty of the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

The set of songs includes “Der Rundschau-January 11, 1909” a translation of a letter written by Heinrich Janzen; “Brauda Friesen and the Rich Mennonites” a satirical poem by David Waltner-Toews; “Vie Zent Tjleene Shnetkje” (We are Little Crumpets) an anonymous nursery rhyme in Low German set in a Handelian style; “Liskje jeit no Kallitsch” (Lizzi goes to College) a Low German poem by C. C. Janzen; “Immigrant Prayer” a translation of Peter Guenther’s lament for his home.

Song number five in the set, “All My Neighbors are Named Johann,” is the subject of this article. The text is a humorous mosaic of Mennonite nicknames. Humor requires surprise. It may be a sudden shift of meaning or a precarious balance between truth and fiction. When a pharmacist is called a “drug dealer” it is humorous because it is unexpected and it is true without being true. This is the kind of humor found in the nicknames given to friends and neighbors in Mennonite immigrant communities.

Evangeline Kroeker has collected many Low German nicknames in her book *Schaule fon Frieyoa* (Echoes from the Past) which was printed privately and can be found in the Mennonite Brethren Archives at Fresno Pacific University. This book served as the primary resource for the “sposs nohmes” (nicknames) in my poem about neighbors named Johann. A few of the names were also provided by Alfred Berg, my father-in-law, who grew up in Hillsboro, Kansas where Low German nicknames were common.

There is something about “plautdietsch” (Low German) that encourages humor.

In the preface to her book, Kroeker writes “The Low German language is a peasant language and has many slang words, which are responsible for the humor connected with it. Much of this humor is also contained in sentence structure....” This is not the place to trace the history of the development of Mennonite Low German. Those who want to pursue that history may consult the preface to Jack Thiessen’s *Low German Dictionary*, Steinback, Manitoba, 1999.

Citizens of Mecklenburg in northern Germany consider Low German to be their provincial dialect. They honor Fritz Reuter for his writing in this dialect just as Americans honor Mark Twain. Mennonites probably adopted Low German in the sixteenth century during their pilgrimage through northern Germany, but during their years in Poland, Russia and America it evolved into a unique language. Following is a list of “sposs nohmes” found in this poem: Rota Boatle (Red Bartel), Blingya Baitja (Blind Becker), Douve Leentje (Deaf Helen), Basem Panna (Broom Maker Penner), Schlopmetis Shmet (Sleepy head Schmidt), Zippel Seibel (Onion Seibel), Shlorre Klohse (Shuffling Klassen), Bangka Pankrauts (Banker Pankratz), Shtritja Leeve (Chiropractor Loewen), Groute Rautslauf (Big Ratzlaff), Tjliena Jaunse (Little Janzen), Shmoke Peeta (Dandy Peter), Glomskopp Yehde (Cheese head Gaede), Kozze Bolt (Goat Bolt), Rout-boatye Foth (Red Beard Voth), Shusta Shreedea (Cobbler Schroeder) Ditja Horems (Fat Harms), Hoashnieda Gousse (Barber Goosen), Muhva Boatel (House mover Bartel), Kjnirps (Twirp), Schnigelfrits (Snuggle Frederick), Piepedakjssel (Pipe-lid “nonsense word”), Hanswurscht (Johnny-sausage “clown”), Melha (miller), Dresha (Thresher), Schmied (Blacksmith). Since Mennonite Low German is primarily an oral language there seems to be no standard spelling. I have chosen to spell words as I found them in various sources and I apologize in advance to specialists who have attempted to standardize the spelling.

Humor can also be heightened when accompanied with appropriate music. This song is patterned after the patter songs sometimes found in comic operas. The famous “Largo al factotum” from Rosinni’s *The Barber of Seville* is an example of this rapid fire, tongue-twister type. The quasi cadenza near the end of this song also is a spoof of cadenzas found in the operas of Verdi.

Wagner creates a humorous effect in his *Ring des Niebelungen* when he has Albrech disclaim any interest in the fateful gold, while the orchestral music boldly

repeats the musical theme associated with the gold ring. Wagner uses so many musical motives linked to characters and concepts that Stravinsky suggested one needs a telephone directory to understand his operas.

My music is not so cerebral as Wagner's but it does make similar use of musical quotation for humorous purposes. When Blingya Baitja is mentioned the words are set to the familiar tune "Three Blind Mice." When Shusta Shreedra is mentioned the words are set to the nursery tune "Round and round the shoe maker's shop the monkey chased the weasel." Schlopmets Shmet gets "Are you sleeping Brother John?" and Bangka Pankrauts gets "The king was in his counting house, counting out his money." All of these quotations pass by so quickly that the audience is not expected to recognize them. They are more a joke between the composer and the performer.

Some attempts at humor are only evident on the printed page. The German term "augenmusik" (eye music) applies to these examples. When Groute Rautslauf is mentioned the melody leaps up an octave, and when Tjliena Jaunse is mentioned the melody moves in half steps.

Other comic effects become the responsibility of the performer. For example, the fermatta following the rapid recitation of "Buhler, Block, Brandt, Berg and Ratzlaff, Nikkel, Nachtigall and Neufeldt, and Patzkowski. How is that spelt?" can be performed as a gasp for breath, or an expression of exasperation. Even the pianist gets a moment of hidden humor. Following the words "Shtritja Leeve knicks our back," the accompaniment has a crisp grace note.

Nothing kills a joke like explanation, and I have already explained far too much, though there are a few more tune-puns for the curious to uncover. Printed music is like the an architect's blueprint. The building needs to be constructed to be fully appreciated. The final test of a composition is the performance.

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

Larry Warkentin

Lively, with humor $\text{♩} = 120$

1. All my neighbors are named Jo-hann, all my neighbors are
 2. All my neighbors are named Jo-hann, all my neighbors are

named Jo-hann. In the coun-try, in the town, — Jo-hann Lee-wen, Schridt and Braun, —
 named Jo-hann Jo-hann Wiens, He-gler and Kroe-ker Jo-hann Zim-mer-man and Post-ler,

Jo-hann War-ken-tin and Klie-wer, Jo-hann Rem-pel, Wiens and Rei-mer, *cresc.* Jo-hann Jan-zen, Berg and Thie-zen,
 Ger-brand, Qua-der, Goo-zen, Goo-zen, Bark-man, Bal-zer, Bie-ker, Doer-zen, Jo-hann Pe-ter, Pfeif and Pankratz,

Jo-hann Bark-man, Erns and Frie-zen, Jo-hann Schellen-berg and I-sack, *rit.* It's e-nough to make a guy sick,
 Buh-ler, Block, Brandt, Berg and Ratzlaff, Nik-kei, Nach-ti-gall and Neufeldt, And Patz-kow-ski. How is that spellt?

2 All My Neighbors are Named Johann

mf *a tempo*

With - out nick-names they'd be no one since their first names all are Jo-hann.
 With - out (etc.)

mf *a tempo*

mf *legato*

And it's al-ways most con-fu-sing When one dies, which one we're loo-sing So we give them all shpohs nob-mes.

mf *legato*

21

Then we know where each one's home is. All the names we choose to use 'em. Hold some plat-dich

23

2nd time skip to M. 49

hid - den ryan-on. *mp* That one's name is Ro - to Bea - de, Rod by birth and

25 2nd time skip to M. 49 *mp*

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of five systems of music. The first system (measures 1-16) features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 17-20) continues the vocal line with lyrics and piano accompaniment. The third system (measures 21-24) continues the vocal line with lyrics and piano accompaniment. The fourth system (measures 25-28) includes a '2nd time skip to M. 49' instruction and continues the vocal line with lyrics and piano accompaniment. The fifth system (measures 29-32) also includes a '2nd time skip to M. 49' instruction and continues the vocal line with lyrics and piano accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf, mp), tempo markings (a tempo), and articulation (legato).

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

3

24
 ved by hot-tel This one's blind he's Blin-gya Bai-tja. His deaf wife is Dou-ve Leen-tje, Ha-sen Pan-na

25
 keeps us sweeping. Schlep-mets Schutick is all ways sleeping. Zip-pel Sei-bel smells like onions, Shlor-re Klob-se

26
 walks with bun-ions

27
 call.

28
 mp

29
 a tempo

30
 Hang-ka Pan-krauts runs the bank, Shai-tja Lee-ve kicks our back, Grou-je Raets-lad's ver-y tall.

4

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

30 *poco all.* *a tempo* *meno mosso*
 Tjie - na Jan - se's ver - y small. Shno - ke Poo - ta charms the la - dies, Grom - kopp'Yeh - de

32 *poco all.* *a tempo* *meno mosso*

33 *a tempo*
 hants the Gae - des. Beards name gov - leed Koo - ze Bolt, And Rou - bout - yn (red beard) Foth.

35 *a tempo*

36 *Tempo*

37 *mf* *mf*

38 *mf*

39 *mf*

40 *mf*

41 *mf*

42 *mf*

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842 *mf*

843 *mf*

844 *mf*

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

5

79

When you think you've named them all A - long come Wil-lem, Wiebe and Wall. Es-ert, El-tren, Tins and Epp,

rit.

82

Lep-ke, Let-ke-mum and Loep-ke, Dal-ke, Dyck, de-Fehr and Quir-ing. Now I think the end is near-ing.

rit.

85

Mac-ke-l-bur-ger, Mir-ou, Graves, Jo-hann A, B, C, D, Toews. With-out nicknames they'd be no one,

f *rit.* *a tempo*

90

since their first names all are Jo-hann. And it's al-ways most con-fus-ing when one dies which one we're los-ing.

mf

32

So we give them all splotchy robes. Then we know where each one's home is. All the names we

37

choose to... some ven hold some plant detch hid - den reas-on. *mp* Shan - ta Shree-da

42

likes to cob-ble, Tai - ja Ho - rents likes to gob-ble Hair cuts by Iku-schrie - da Gooz-er,

47

Mah - ra Ben - tel moves our buss - on. *p* Lit - the Ju - hanns in... the mix are

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

115
 named Kjøps and Schjap-el-frits. *mf* Some are orn-ly from the first like

117

120 *and. e cresc. poco a poco*
 Pjep - e-dokj - sel and Titt-marscht. *mf* Jo-hann dookor, Jo - hann Chief

120 *and. e cresc. poco a poco*

121

122
 Jo-hann Me-lia, Dre - sha, Schmiel. Ach, the list of names could go on All be-cause they're

123

126 *quasi cadenza*
 all named Johann, All my neigh-bors are named Johann Johann, Johann, Johann, Johann,

126

All My Neighbors are Named Johann

Allegro

Jo - hann. Jo - hann, Jo - hann, Jo - hann, Jo - hann, Jo - hann

Allegro

Jo-hann, Jo-hann by the do-zens, And, they're *ff* all each-oth-er's cou-sins —

gtr.

Allegro

legato *meno mosso*

mp Now that you have heard this long song You can tell which

Allegro

Jo - hann's Jo - hann —