

How to Cheer Up a Sad Song

by Con Chapman

It is one of the most difficult problems of aesthetic philosophy: What do we mean when we say that a song is sad? I've read Aristotle, Kant, Croce—Benedetto, not Jim—all the big names. As far as I can tell, nobody's come close to answering the question.



Benedetto Croce

More important—it seems to me—is why isn't anybody *doing* anything about it. You've got all these sad songs out there—from the peaks of “Lush Life” by Billy Strayhorn to the swamps of “Feelings” by Morris Albert—walking around depressed, ready to do something drastic if somebody doesn't cheer them up.



Billy Strayhorn

The main reason I ended my career in philosophy when I graduated from college is this do-nothing attitude. I'm sorry—you can't just write *A Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* like Kant and leave people hanging. You've got to deliver on your prolegomena, otherwise you're just a tease.

That's why I've gathered the *Kindertotenlieder*—"Songs on the Death of Children," poems by Friedrich Ruckert set to music by Gustav Mahler, probably the five saddest songs in Western culture—for a Saturday excursion. Get them out of the house, take them shopping, do *something* to snap them out of their morbid mood.



Gustav Mahler

We pile into my Ford Taurus station wagon with the fold-up rear seat. It's not the nicest car in our garage, but it's the only one that will seat six comfortably.

"Where's the seat belt back here?" It's *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n*, who's always a whiner.

"The clasp is under the seat, the belt's on the side rail," I say, trying not to snap. It could be a long afternoon.

"I want to stop for coffee," says *Nun she' ich wohl, warum so dunkle Flammen*. "And *not* at Dunkin' Donuts." Mr. Picky.



Make sure you have enough Munchkins!

"Does this car have GPS?" *Wenn dein Mutterlein* asks.
"Because you know you're going to get lost." I'm beginning to question why I thought this was a good idea.

"I know where I'm going," I say, a bit testily. "We're going out to the candlepin bowling alley on Route 9. They should have the Santa's Village display set up."

"I *hate* Christmas." It's *Oft denk'ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen*, who's pouting in the back because *In diesem Wetter!* called shotgun before he could.

"I think you're going to like this place. It's got candlepin bowling . . ."

"Candlepins is *hard!*" says *In diesem*.

He's right about that. "I'll ask them to put the bumpers in, so you won't throw any gutter balls." He's mollified, but he's still got a grumpy look on his face. "Santa's Village is cool," I say, hoping to get them to think happy thoughts. "All the reindeer move their heads, and the elves in Santa's workshop swing their hammers."

"Is there food?" *Wenn* asks. That's one thing I made sure of. The last thing I need is five German *lieder* with low blood sugar on my hands.

"There's the usual assortment of soft drinks and candy in the vending machines, plus they have pizza."

"Yay—pizza!" yells *Oft denk'ich*. Maybe there's hope.

We pull into the parking lot and the songs pile out of the car. These guys have been around for over a hundred years, and yet they shuffle into the bowling alley like sullen teenagers. If it weren't for my strong commitment to volunteer work, I'd say that no good deed goes unpunished.

We go up to the counter to rent shoes. I look down at their *liederfüße* and see that *Nun will* has forgotten to wear socks. "That's going to cost us an extra buck-fifty," I say with an upraised eyebrow to express my disappointment.

"It wasn't *my* idea to come here," he says as he checks his iPhone.

We have to wait for a while to get a lane with gutter bumpers. There's evidence that Germans have been bowling since 300 A.D. so you'd think these guys would have picked up the game by now, but no, they still need a crutch that was invented for toddlers. I chalk it up to their lack of social skills. Don't sit around the house like a gloomy Gus if you don't have a date—get your friends together and make your own fun!



I get them Cokes—probably not a good idea with the caffeine—and let them have the run of Santa's Village. After a while I see them start to smile a bit, and I begin to sing—“*I often think: they have only just gone out, and now they will be coming back home.*”

“What?” says *Oft denk'ich*.

“Nothing,” I say. “Finish that soda—our lane's ready.”

