



## Something Fir Everyone

Well, now I've heard everything. Bob Dylan singing Little Drummer Boy is like Van Gogh painting the Easter Bunny. The Dylan Christmas album is so weird I can barely fathom it, even when I'm listening to it. Weird but also of course a marketing bonanza. I imagine fellow gravel-voicer Tom Waits is kicking himself for not thinking of it. Also, I think Dylan's project may have interesting repercussions.

Maybe Dylan singing these traditional sing-along songs will promote a rebirth of interest in traditional singalong songs in general, which would be good for the wobbly trajectory of traditional folk music. Maybe he'll come out with a CD of Junior Woodchucks' campfire songs next. And I'll buy it, no doubt.

But it is that time of year, as they say, and Bob Dylan and I HAVE been thinking about seasonal songs. I may have mentioned before that I sometimes help my in-laws sell Christmas trees on a ramshackle cut-your-own tree farm up north of here. I was thinking about this approaching annual catastrophe today, and suddenly I noticed the song *O Tannenbaum* was dancing in my head like sugarplums.

The melody of this song has always seemed a little strange to me. And come to think of it, the arrangement of lyrics is odd too, though everything seems to work together quite well.

To me, the melody -- a waltz -- is strange because of what feels like a dropping of a syllable in the second line. It really, in a way, gives the song its uniqueness. I think it's interesting that the lost (unsung) syllable has stayed with the lyric through the different translations and rewritings that I have come across.

Here's one standard translation:

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
How lovely are your branches,  
So green and bright in summertime,  
As well as winter's snowy clime,*

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
How lovely are your branches.*

Maybe it's me, but the fact that there are eight sung syllables in all the lines but "How lovely are your branches," in which there are seven syllables, is a great part of what makes the song memorable. In my own thudding way as a songwriter, I probably would have written something with eight sung syllables in all the lines, and thrown in another rhyme while I was at it. Which would have wrecked it into something like:

*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
How lovely is your canopy,  
So green and bright in summertime,  
As well as winter's snowy clime,  
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,  
How lovely is your canopy.*

Something stupid like that. The original is a great example of less-is-more. The German versions I've found have this same syllabic structure. This is a common version of the second verse:

*O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum,  
Du kannst mir sehr gefallen!  
Wie oft hat schon zur Winterzeit  
Ein Baum von dir mich hoch erfreut!  
O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum,  
Du kannst mir sehr gefallen!*

Now, I don't speak any German but according to the Babelfish online translation site, this translates literally as:

*O fir tree, o fir tree  
You can please me much!  
How often during the winter time  
A tree of you pleased me highly!  
O fir tree, o fir tree  
You can please me much!*

I'm sure a looser translation would be much more valuable. However, this does bring up another interesting point. "Tannenbaum" means "fir tree" from everything I have read on the subject. And though "Winterzeit" is translated as "Christmastime" in some of the English translations of the song, it apparently more accurately means just "Wintertime." As I say, I don't speak any German, so I may be wrong in how these words are actually used. But I keep finding "Weihnachten" to be the German word for Christmas, not "Winterzeit."

So if I'm correct, in the original German

this song isn't really about a Christmas Tree specifically, but is about the fir tree in general, and how beautiful it is and how the year-round color permanence of evergreens can serve as an example to all of us of the advantages of steadfastness. So, like *Winter Wonderland*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *Let It Snow*, *Jingle Bells*, and other non-Christmas-specific snowy celebration songs, it's a good one for general midwinter cheer, if I understand the literal translation correctly.

Incidentally, we can do whatever we want with this song, as I'm sure the copyright has run out. The melody is "traditional" (and used for the state songs of Maryland and Iowa) and the German lyrics most popular today were written by Ernst Anschütz in 1824.

So here, in honor of the cut-your-own business, and of the fir trees represented most commonly in Wisconsin by the Balsam and even more popular (and therefore harder to find on a cut-your-own farm) Fraser Fir, is my lame version, keeping the odd rhyme scheme and dropped-syllable scheme intact:

*O Fraser Fir, O Fraser Fir  
Your whereabouts eludes me  
I have my shades, my can of beer  
I even brought, my chainsaw here  
O Fraser Fir, O Fraser Fir  
Your whereabouts eludes me*

*O Fraser Fir, O Fraser Fir  
There must be one left somewhere  
I do not care how much you cost  
The kids are bored, the dog is lost  
O Fraser Fir, O Fraser Fir  
There must be one left somewhere*

*No Fraser Fir, No Fraser Fir  
We'll buy an artificial  
We could look more, but what a shame  
We'd have to miss, the Packer game  
No Fraser Fir, No Fraser Fir  
We'll buy an artificial*

Think maybe I should send it to Dylan?

### Webliography:

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--WZ December 2009