

William Billings

Pioneer American Composer of Congregational Music

Suzanne L. Edwards and Christine Glick

During the 1700s, William Billings emerged as a popular composer and performer of sacred music in New England. Despite being "somewhat deformed in person, blind with one eye, one leg shorter than the other," and with "one arm somewhat withered," he was a remarkable man.¹ In the opinion of some of his contemporaries and twentieth-century critics Billings was a pompous and proud man. However, from Billings's own writings we can conclude that he also expressed a more humble attitude. For example, in the introduction to his first tunebook, *The New England Psalm-Singer*, he wrote:

Perhaps there may appear in the Eyes of the Accurate much Incorrectness that I was not able to discern; therefore would beg the Critic to be tender, and rectify those Errors which through inexperience may happen to have escaped the Notice of a Youth in the Course of so large a Volume.

As one author aptly put it, "he was a brilliant, if headstrong and lovable wanderer from the straight and narrow way."²

William Billings was born in Boston on October 7, 1746. He received formal schooling until the age of 14, when his father died. He trained as a tanner, an occupation he practiced most of his life. He married Lucy Swan, who bore him nine children, six of which survived infancy.³ He worked with and studied under John Barry, a local singer and choir leader, but was primarily self-educated in music. In Boston, he established the Stoughton Music Society, the oldest North American concert-giving society still in existence. During the time of the Revolutionary War, his tune CHESTER is said to have become the unofficial war anthem. Paul Revere, a friend of Billings, engraved the frontispiece of *The New England Psalm-Singer*.

Although he was in relatively good economic standing for most of his life, Billings's last decade was spent in poverty. We can only speculate about the cause of his impoverishment. The general eco-

nomie difficulties of 1786 and the responsibilities of feeding his large family may have contributed to Billings's decreasing fortunes. Perhaps his independence from traditional music theory ostracized him from his better-educated contemporaries. Their public disapproval of his works may have influenced his popularity and thus his earnings. Billings died on September 29, 1800.

Billings wrote a great deal of sacred music. Between 1700 and 1794 he published six tunebooks: *The New England Psalm-Singer*, *The Singing Master's Assistant*, *Music in Miniature*, *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*, *The Suffolk Harmony*, and *The Continental Harmony*. *The New England Psalm-Singer* was the first tunebook written and compiled by a single American composer. It contained over 120 original tunes and anthems. *The Singing Master's Assistant* included a substantial number of revised versions of his earlier works interspersed with new ones. This was the first tunebook published after the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, and it exuded a strong nationalistic mood.

Music in Miniature, a tune supplement, presented a variety of plain tunes designed for congregational singing. *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* was compiled for the accomplished singer.⁴ His last books, *The Suffolk Harmony* and *The Continental Harmony* showed his continued musical development, but did not add substantially to his success.

Some 200 psalm, hymn, and fusing tunes are attributed to Billings. Hymn tunes are short strophic songs of praise to God. Psalm tunes take their texts from biblical psalms that have been cast into metrical form. One of Billings's favorite compositional forms was the "fusing" tune, a form that originated in Great Britain. When Billings spoke of "fusing" he meant that one or more phrases of the melody were repeated in different voices at different times. During Billings's time psalm, hymn, and fusing tunes usually consisted of four unaccompanied voice parts (treble, counter, tenor, and bass), with the melody in the tenor.

Forty-seven anthems are thought to have been written by Billings. Anthems are through-composed settings of prose or poetic texts, often featuring solo sections of one or two voices alternating with full chorus. Billings said that the chorus sections of anthems should be "so exceedingly grand as to cause the floor to tremble."⁵ The alternation between solo and chorus can be seen in "An Anthem, for Fast Day" (example 1).

Billings's earlier music is replete with technical "mistakes." For example, he repeatedly used parallel fifths and octaves, considered taboo in traditional music theory and to be avoided at all costs. From a theoretical standpoint, these "mistakes" are easy to spot. However, his later music showed considerable maturity in compositional theory. "His harmony is that of a musical, but illiterate person; even the 'dumb' passages however can not entirely prevent us from realizing that there is a spirit confined working desperately to free itself."⁶

¹Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 46.

²Hamilton C. MacDougall, *Early New England Psalmody: An Historical Appreciation 1620-1820* (Brattleboro: Steven Daye Press, 1940), 61.

³Ralph T. Daniel, *The Anthem in New England before 1800* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 102.

⁴David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 110.

⁵Gilbert Chase, *America's Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 130.

⁶MacDougall, 52.

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Example 1 shows a musical score for the hymn "Be glad then America, shout, shout, and rejoice." The score is written in 2/4 time and consists of four systems of staves. The lyrics are: "Be glad then America, shout, shout, and rejoice, ca, shout, shout, and rejoice, ut, be glad then America, shout and rejoice, (shout, shout, and rejoice, shout, shout and rejoice, joice, be glad then America, shout, and rejoice,"

Example 1

Despite its technical shortcomings, Billings's music showed originality and spirit. He often used a textural technique called the choosing-note, "an extra note in a voice, so that the singer was free to choose which note to sing"⁷ (see example 2). This technique was in use in other areas of the world, but Billings was the first to employ it in New England.⁸

Example 2

Billings effectively used doubling of voice parts. As was common practice in performances of the time, Billings often had two or three sopranos double the tenor part an octave higher, creating a richer timbre and adding to the grandeur of the music (see example 3).

Example 2 illustrates the "choosing-note" technique. It shows a single melodic line with several notes marked with a small circle above them, indicating that the singer can choose to sing or omit these notes. The lyrics are: "shout, shout, shout, shout, and rejoice,"

Most of his anthem texts came from the King James Version of the Bible or the Anglican Prayer Book. However, he incorporated many variations in the texts. These reflected contemporary life and patriotism, which was considered radical for church music. In "An Anthem, for Fast Day" Billings quoted portions of the book of Joel. For example, he used part of Joel 2:19, "Yea the Lord will answer and say unto his people, 'behold I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith.'" In the other sections he sought to make the text relevant to the people of his time, substituting "America" for "ye children of Zion" from Joel 2:23, "Be glad then ye children of Zion." In the opening of the anthem Billings used his own prose to enhance the mood of the passage from Joel, using key words such as "mourn," "darkness," and "doom."

Billings's music, though widely used by New England congregations during the late 1700s, is mostly performed by choirs today. However, several of his tunes appear in recent church hymnals. The canon *WHEN JESUS WEPT* from *The New En-*

Example 3 shows a musical score for the hymn "Hal - le - lu - jah, hal - le - lu - jah, hal - le - lu - jah." The score is written in 6/4 time and consists of two systems of staves. The lyrics are: "Hal - le - lu - jah, hal - le - lu - jah, hal - le - lu - jah, praise the Lord, Hal - le - lu jah, hal - le - lu - jah,"

Example 3

gland Psalm-Singer appears most frequently. His tune *LEWIS-TOWN*, originally published in *The Continental Harmony*, can be found in *Worship: A Hymnal, Service Book for Roman Catholics*, and the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. *JORDAN*, originally from *The Suffolk Harmony*, is in *A New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools*. The tune *AMHERST* from *The New England Psalm-Singer* can be found in *Rejoice in the Lord*.

Billings's importance lies not in his being a transition from one musical period to another, but rather in the life and energy he brought into the sacred music of New England. He presented a fresh outlook to composition of music for the church. In his own words he summed up his approach to music and composition: "for my own part...I don't think myself confined to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me...I think it best for every Composer to be his own Carver."⁹

⁷J. Murray Barbour, *The Church Music of William Billings* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 119.

⁸Daniel, *Anthem*, 113.

⁹Chase, 129.