

# Two Unknown Billings Compositions in John Norman's *The Massachusetts Harmony* (1784)

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In the past two decades, the American psalmist William Billings has received a good deal of scholarly attention. A biography of him has been published,<sup>1</sup> a dozen or so articles have appeared in scholarly journals,<sup>2</sup> seminars on his life and music have been held at institutions of higher learning, and a "Complete Works" edition of his music has been published, sponsored by two learned societies.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there is much that we still do not know about Billings's life, activities, and compositional methods. His biographical record is full of holes that may never be filled, in spite of diligent research and imaginative interpretation of existing records. One of the darker periods of Billings's life is the decade of the 1780s. He began the decade, the final years of the Revolutionary War, conspicuously successful, but ended it in dire financial straits. He issued two tunebooks and five pamphlet-size publications during the period, but he was apparently unable to gain significant public support for his music. He attempted to change the focus of his activities by editing a literary and political magazine, but his efforts, rejected by Boston's gentry, were aborted after one issue. All of this begs the question, "why?" It is hoped that this brief study of two of his compositions, while not answering the question, will at least shed light on some of his activities and his compositional methods during this obscure period.

In 1784 a tunebook was published in Boston entitled *The Massachusetts Harmony*,<sup>4</sup> its compiler listed on the title page only as "a lover of harmony." It was printed for and sold by John Norman, a Boston bookseller and engraver who, along with his son William, was closely connected with the publication of tunebooks in Boston throughout the last two decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The American bibliographer Charles Evans attributed the tunebook tentatively to William Billings,<sup>6</sup> but the American sacred music scholar Frank Metcalf completely rejected this attribution. Metcalf observed: "We cannot think that William Billings, who was so fond of self-praise, would allow any of his own productions to go forth without his name upon the title page. We doubt therefore that *The Massachusetts Harmony* could be his."<sup>7</sup>

Metcalf was undoubtedly correct in rejecting Billings as the compiler of the tunebook, but Billings almost certainly had a hand in it. He seems to have contributed at least two, and possibly as many as six, compositions to the collection. Although it cannot be proven, it seems likely that John Norman himself was the "lover of harmony" responsible for the collection, and the close connection between Norman and Billings at this time argues for a larger role for Billings in its compilation.<sup>8</sup> It would have been natural for Norman to call on his colleague for advice and to contribute music to his publication, the first eclectic tunebook to be published in Boston in two decades.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>See James R. Heintze, *Early American Music: A Research and Information Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp.371–375, for a partial bibliography.

<sup>3</sup>*The Complete Works of William Billings*, 4 vols., ed. by Hans Nathan and Karl Kroeger (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts and The American Musicological Society, 1977–1990).

<sup>4</sup>Allen P. Britton, Irving Lowens, and Richard Crawford, *American Sacred Music Imprints, 1698–1810: A Bibliography* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1990), no.376 (hereafter cited as *ASMI*). Although *The Massachusetts Harmony* (hereafter cited as *MH*) is undated, its publication in 1784 is confirmed by an advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* of October 25, 1784, announcing it as “just published” (*ASMI*, p. 453). A second edition with additional music was issued the following year.

<sup>5</sup>The most complete account of John and William Norman’s involvement with sacred music publications in Boston appears in *ASMI*, pp.477–480. There Crawford states that John and William Norman seem to have been responsible for the plates of every new engraved collection of sacred music printed in Boston between 1781 and 1800 (p.480).

<sup>6</sup>Charles Evans, *American Bibliography*, 14 vols. (Chicago, 1903–59), v.6 (1779–1785), no.18366, p.272. The entry is given as “Billings, William?” Clifford K. Shipton and James Mooney’s *National Index of American Imprints through 1800*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1969) continues Evans’s queried attribution (v.1, p.507).

<sup>7</sup>Frank J. Metcalf, *American Writers and Compilers of Sacred Music* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967; repr. of the New York, 1925 ed.), p.62. A fuller discussion of the attribution of the tunebook is found on pp.76–77 in connection with Metcalf’s section on Andrew Law.

<sup>8</sup>John Norman lived only a few doors away from Billings on Newbury Street in Boston (Billings lived at no. 89 and Norman at no. 75; Newbury Street, which ran close to the Boston Common, was only two blocks long). Norman engraved Billings’s *The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement* (Boston, 1781) and his anthem *PEACE* (Boston, ca.1783), and Billings edited the first issue of Norman’s *The Boston Magazine*. This professional contact continued for at least the next decade.

<sup>9</sup>Josiah Flagg’s *A Collection of the Best Psalm Tunes* (Boston, 1764) was the only prior eclectic tunebook to be published. (By “eclectic” is meant a tunebook containing a wide variety of tunes by different composers, designed to supply the musical needs of the singing school, the church choir, and the accomplished singer.) Of course, Billings’s own tunebooks bear a Boston imprint as do some tune supplements, but these are publications designed for special purposes. Daniel Bayley’s *American Harmony*—combined reprints of William Tans’ur’s *The Royal Melody Compleat* and Aaron Williams’s *The Universal Psalmist*—were published in Newburyport, but undoubtedly sold in Boston.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Daniel Bayley’s tunebooks from the 1770s and early 1780s rarely carry full or accurate attributions; nor does Stickney’s *The Gentleman and Lady’s Musical Companion* (1774) and Law’s *The Rudiments of Music* (1783).

<sup>11</sup>Tunes such as Carpenter’s *HARTFORD*, Bull’s *MIDDLETOWN* and *PSALM 46*, Deaolph’s *PSALM 136*, Babcock’s *SPRINGFIELD*, King’s *SLEEFIELD*, Hibbard’s *NORWICH*, and Gillet’s *PSALM 25* were certainly taken from Law’s tunebook: they were published nowhere else. It is also likely that British composer Martin Madan’s *DENBIGH*, *DENMARK*, and *FALMOUTH* were taken from Law, where they were printed for the first time in America, rather than from Madan’s own “Lock Hospital Collection” (London, 1769). Thirty-five tunes can be traced to Law’s *Select Harmony*. Five of six tunes by

This discussion will focus on two compositions, *EFFINGHAM* and *PARIA*, in *MH* that are almost certainly by Billings. That unknown compositions by him can still be found after the intense scrutiny his life and work has recently undergone shows that there is much to be discovered about him. He was apparently more generous with his music than has been known, and more of a force in Boston’s music of the late eighteenth century than has been heretofore suspected. This article will also identify some other anonymous tunes in 1780s Boston publications that may be by Billings, although at present these attributions cannot be confirmed.

*MH* is a typical oblong, end-opening tunebook, printed from engraved plates, containing ninety-one compositions in its ninety-five pages. Except for a single piece attributed to the British psalmodist Joseph Stephenson, none of the compositions bear any composers’ names. Any new tunes would thus have been hidden by the anonymity of all compositions. Just why Norman chose not to identify the composers is unknown, but this procedure was by no means unique at the time.<sup>10</sup> The contents of the tunebook are an eclectic mix of standard British psalm tunes and newer American tunes, many pirated from Andrew Law’s *Select Harmony* (Cheshire, 1779 and 1782).<sup>11</sup>

Unlike most prior American tunebooks, *MH* begins with a very short section on the rudiments of music (only three pages), suggesting that its value as a singing-school book was limited.<sup>12</sup> It was perhaps better suited for use in public worship, where its varied selection of tunes would be both useful and appealing. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that many tunes were printed without text, inviting the singers to sing any hymn that fit the poetic meter of the music.

Among the six tunes that saw their first printing in *MH* are two that can be ascribed to William Billings. *EFFINGHAM* can be related directly to Billings’s tune *DICKINSON*, published in 1770 in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.<sup>13</sup> In my article “Will-

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Billings published previously in his *The Singing Master’s Assistant* (Boston, 1779) could also have come from Law, although Billings may have allowed Norman free access to his tunebooks. Other tunebooks from which *MH* borrowed include Simeon Jocelin’s *The Chorister’s Companion* (New Haven, 1782), John Stickney’s *The Gentleman and Lady’s Musical Companion* (Newburyport, 1774), Law’s *A Select Number of Plain Tunes* (Cheshire, 1781), and Billings’s *Music In Miniature* (Boston, 1779).

<sup>12</sup>The editor notes in the preface that his motive for compiling the tunebook was “a sincere desire to furnish Schools with a variety of plain Psalm Tunes, and such as were particularly adapted to public social Worship” (*MH*, p.[2]). In spite of this testimony, the brevity of the theoretical introduction, as compared with Bayley’s *American Harmony*, Billings’s *The Singing Master’s Assistant*, and Law’s *Select Harmony*, would have required much supplemental explanation from the singing master.

<sup>13</sup>William Billings, *The New England Psalm-Singer* (Boston, 1770), p.73; *The Complete Works of William Billings*, I, p. 262.

iam Billings's Music in Manuscript Copy and Some Notes of Variant Versions of his Pieces," I described a method that Billings used to transform some of his older pieces into new compositions.<sup>14</sup> The method involved using the older work, usually a plain tune progressing in half- and whole-notes, as the basis of the new work by applying decorative figures to the melodic lines. In the article, I described these "ornamental variants" as follows:

Ornamental variants are those in which details of pitch and rhythm have been altered but the fundamental structure of the tune remains unchanged. Passing tones may fill in melodic leaps; a change of meter may introduce different rhythmic values; or alterations of some pitches may change slightly the melodic details of some phrases; but there are no new phrases. The tunes are of the same length and adapted to the same poetic meter or ones that are closely related.<sup>15</sup>

I cited several examples of this process occurring in both manuscript copies and in music that Billings himself published, most notably the transformation of BREST from *Music in Miniature* into the first section of BRATTLE STREET in *The Suffolk Harmony* and ASIA from *The New-England Psalm-Singer* into the first part of COBHAM in *The Continental Harmony*.<sup>16</sup> The important thing, as I pointed out in the article, is that the two pieces "maintain a clear and unequivocal similarity in the principal melody."<sup>17</sup> The accompanying parts often vary more substantially, but even they will usually bear similar melodic shapes.

Figure 1.  
Melodic Comparison of  
DICKINSON and EFFINGHAM

One can see from the above example that the melody of EFFINGHAM bears a close melodic resemblance to DICKINSON. Two of the four phrases in each melody begin and end on the same pitches. The second phrase differs, beginning on the same pitch, but ending on the dominant in EFFINGHAM rather than the tonic as in DICKINSON. In the fourth phrase the opposite occurs, with DICKINSON beginning on the supertonic and EFFINGHAM on the dominant. The melodic contours of each phrase are very similar, with the passing tones filling in most of the leaps in the DICKINSON melody. Here Billings employed a process similar to that seen in

transforming BREST into the first part of BRATTLE STREET: he kept the main features of the base tune while enlivening the rhythm by changing the meter and decorating the notes with passing tones, neighboring tones, and dotted eighth- and sixteenth-note figures. Since Billings had done the same thing with several tunes he published, there is no reason to think he would not have transformed DICKINSON into EFFINGHAM for publication in *MH*.

With *PARIA*, one does not have an earlier model to which to relate the tune directly. Yet it bears many of Billings's stylistic hallmarks, the sum of which convinces me that it is by Billings. These traits include the key—E major, "The Author's darling key, He prefers to the rest," as he tells us in *MODERN MUSIC*.<sup>18</sup> The structure of the tune is similar to several that Billings composed, for example, *EAST-SUDBURY* and *EGYPT* in *The Continental Harmony*. Both *PARIA* and *EGYPT* are integrated fusing-tunes, in that the fuge is an inseparable part of the structure, not a polyphonic coda that could be sung or not at the performers' pleasure. As such, *PARIA* is in the minority in Billings's catalog, since he distinctly preferred the "fusing chorus" type, in which the fuge is a detachable section. However, Billings composed enough integrated fusing-tunes to make *PARIA* part of a small but significant group in Billings's catalog of works. Both *EGYPT* and *PARIA* begin with a long "gathering" note and end the homophonic section on a dominant harmony. The rhythmic style of the first section of *PARIA* is similar to *EAST-SUDBURY*. Both set Hallelujah Meter (6.6.6.6.4.4.4.4) texts, which segment the first four lines of the poem into very short melodic phrases. While *EAST-SUDBURY* is not a fusing-tune, it maintains a structure similar to *PARIA*, with a major sectional division coming at the start of the four-syllable lines, which are then repeated.

The fuge displays a number of Billings's fingerprints. It is a fairly sophisticated composition that encompasses eleven measures of polyphony. Although it employs a quarter-note motion, it maintains an individual character, avoiding the ubiquitous repeated-note pattern found in many American fusing-tunes. It appears to have been composed by someone completely comfortable with fugal counterpoint in the parish style. Similar rising head motives, here depicting the meaning of the text, are found in a number of Billings's fuges.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the most decisive Billings feature is found in the series of sequences in the tenor voice between mm.16 and 20. Similar sequences are found prominently in *BOSTON*, *EMANUEL*, *ESSEX*, *ST. JOHN'S*, *SOUTH BOSTON*, *STOCKBRIDGE*, *THOMAS-TOWN*, and *WEST BOSTON*. Indeed, the sequential repetition of short melodic phrases is something of a stylistic trademark with Billings. Most other American composers of the day made relatively little use of sequence. This seems the most substantial stylistic trait in *PARIA* that ties the tune to Billings.

If Billings did not compose *PARIA*, who might have done so?<sup>20</sup> At the time *PARIA* was published, Billings was almost unrivaled as a composer of sacred music in Boston. The only other known composer in Boston in 1784 was William Selby, organist at the Stone Chapel.<sup>21</sup> Selby was an Englishman who came to Boston in 1771 after having held several parish organist positions in London churches. While in London, Selby had several tunes published in British collections, but a review of his pieces does not suggest him as a likely composer of *PARIA*.<sup>22</sup>

A group of young American composers had emerged in Connecticut, among them Amos Bull, Daniel Read, Oliver Brownson, Solomon Chandler, and Alexander Gillet. They were fond of fusing-tunes, and any of them could have composed *PARIA*. But it seems unlikely that John Norman, the presumed compiler of *MH*, would go so far afield to solicit new music from composers who were largely unknown locally.

In Massachusetts, Abraham Wood in Northborough, near Worcester, was emerging as an important composer of psalmody. He had had a piece published by Billings in *Music in Minia-*

Figure 2.  
A Comparison of  
Sequences in *PARIA*  
and *BOSTON*

ture, one by Andrew Law in *Select Harmony*, and his set piece, *HYMN ON PEACE*, had been engraved and printed by John Norman in May 1784. Norman, then, certainly knew of Wood and may have solicited the work from him; but a survey of Wood's collected works offers little reason to believe that he was the composer.<sup>23</sup>

Further west, on the New York state border, Lewis Edson was beginning to build a reputation. He had recently published his three fusing-tunes, *BRIDGEWATER*, *GREENFIELD*, and *LENOX*, in Simeon Jocelin's *The Chorister's Companion* (New Haven, 1782). However, the fact that these fusing-tunes, which made Edson's reputation by being reprinted more often than any other American composition between 1770 and 1810, were not included in *MH* argues against his being the composer of *PARIA*.<sup>24</sup>

Two other American composers may be ruled out: William Tuckey and James Lyon. Tuckey, who had been clerk of New York's Trinity Church and Philadelphia's St. Peter's Church, was the composer of several popular psalm tunes, but is not known to have composed a fusing-tune. In any case, he died in 1781, making him seem improbable as the author of *PARIA*. James Lyon, whose *Urania* (Philadelphia, 1761) can be counted as the first eclectic tunebook published in America, was ministering to a congregation in the small frontier town of Machias, Maine, in 1784. While he appears to have kept in contact with New England musicians—several new tunes by him were published during the 1770s and 1780s—he seems unlikely as *PARIA*'s composer, both in terms of style and the remoteness of his residence.

Thus, it would seem, after eliminating other possible composers, that we are left with Billings as the most likely candidate for *PARIA*'s creator, and since the tune shows traits that can be identified with Billings from pieces that are unequivocally his, there seems little doubt, in my opinion, of his authorship.

Four other tunes appear anonymously for the first time in *MH*: *LEXINGTON* (p.22), *NORTH STREET* (p.78), *SHEFFIELD* (p.77), and *WASHINGTON* (p.88). There is a strong possibility that these are also Billings pieces, although they exhibit nothing concrete to tie them stylistically to him. In particular, *WASHINGTON*, called in some reprints *WASHINGTON-NEW* and in others *BENNINGTON*, went on to be one of the more popular fusing-tunes of the decade,

<sup>14</sup> Karl Kroeger, "William Billings's Music in Manuscript Copy and Some Notes on Variant Versions of his Pieces," *Notes* 39 (December 1982), pp.316-345.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.335.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.343-344.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.335.

<sup>18</sup> *The Complete Works of William Billings*, III, p.98.

<sup>19</sup> For example, *BETHLEHEM*, *NORTH PROVIDENCE*, *WASHINGTON* in *The Singing Master's Assistant*; *FRAMINGHAM*, *ASSURANCE*, *ANDOVER*, *ADORATION* in *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*; and *MORNING HYMN*, *WEYMOUTH* in *The Continental Harmony*.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Temperley and Charles G. Manns, *Fuging Tunes in the Eighteenth Century* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1983), p.359, list only *MH* as a source for *PARIA*. This strongly suggests that it is an American tune, not one borrowed from a British psalmody collection.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Crawford, "Selby, William," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, ed. by H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1986), IV:184. See also Barbara Lambert, "Music Masters in Colonial Boston," Appendix C in *Music in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1820, II: Music in Homes and in Churches* (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1985), pp.1112-1142.

<sup>22</sup> Selby had tunes published in William Riley's *Parochial Harmony Corrected* (London, 1762) and *A Second Collection of Psalms and Hymns Used at the Madgalen Chapel* (London, 1772). My thanks to Nicholas Temperley and the Hymn Tune Index at the University of Illinois for providing copies of Selby's tunes from these collections. Selby's music published in America includes *Two Anthems* (Boston, 1782) and tunes in *The Massachusetts Compiler* (Boston, 1795), Samuel Holyoke's *The Columbian Repository* (Salem, 1803), and Oliver Shaw's *The Providence Selection* (Providence, 1815).

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Wood, *The Collected Works*, ed. by Karl Kroeger [Music of the New American Nation, v.6] (New York: Garland Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> "The Collected Works of Lewis Edson" in *Three New York Composers*, ed. by Karl Kroeger [Music of the New American Nation, v.3] (New York: Garland Press, 1995), pp.1-44.

and it would be satisfying to connect this to Billings.<sup>25</sup> However, in spite of its sophistication in form and contrapuntal technique, there is nothing distinctive about it that would lead one to claim it as a Billings composition.

If we accept EFFINGHAM and PARIA to be Billings compositions, we have two attractive pieces to add to his already substantial list of works. There are probably other Billings compositions buried anonymously in Boston tunebooks of the 1780s and 1790s. Tunes like WESTFIELD and HUMILITATION from *Sacred Harmony* (Boston, 1788), STODDARD, SURRY, and FRIENDSHIP from *The Federal Harmony* (Boston, 1788), and GREENSBOROUGH and UXBRIDGE from *The Federal Harmony* (Boston, 1790) are candidates for Billings compositions. Perhaps, as we learn more about Billings's activities, style, and methods of composition, we may be able to draw these and similar works into his expanding catalog of pieces. ■

<sup>25</sup>The tune was called WASHINGTON-NEW in *Sacred Harmony* (Boston, 1788) and BENNINGTON in *The Worcester Collection*, 1st-4th eds. (Worcester and Boston, 1786-1792), Daniel Bayley's *The New Harmony of Zion* (Newburyport, 1788), and Solomon Howe's *The Farmer's Evening Entertainment* (Northampton, 1804).

## EFFINGHAM

Massachusetts Harmony, p. 14

## EFFINGHAM

Massachusetts Harmony, p. 14

No text

S. M.

The first system of the musical score for 'EFFINGHAM' consists of four staves. The top staff is the melody in treble clef. The second staff is a treble clef accompaniment. The third staff is a treble clef accompaniment with an 8va marking. The bottom staff is a bass clef accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

The second system of the musical score for 'EFFINGHAM' continues the four-staff arrangement from the first system. It maintains the same key signature and time signature.

# PARIA

Massachusetts Harmony, p. 87

# PARIA

Massachusetts Harmony, p. 87

New Version, Psalm 148:1

H. M.

Ye bound-less realms of joy, Ex-alt your mak-er's fame; His praise your songs em-ploy A-bove the star-ry frame:

Ye bound-less realms of joy, Ex-alt your mak-er's fame; His praise your songs em-ploy A-bove the star-ry frame:

Ye bound-less realms of joy, Ex-alt your mak-er's fame; His praise your songs em-ploy A-bove the star-ry frame:

Ye bound-less realms of joy, Ex-alt your mak-er's fame; His praise your songs em-ploy A-bove the star-ry frame: Your

Your voic-es raise, \_\_\_\_\_ Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, Your

Your voic-es raise, \_\_\_\_\_ Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, To

Your voic-es raise, \_\_\_\_\_ Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, Your voic-es raise, Ye \_\_\_\_\_

voic-es raise, \_\_\_\_\_ Ye cher-u-bim \_\_\_\_\_ And ser-a-phin, \_\_\_\_\_ To sing his praise, Your

voic-es raise, \_\_\_\_\_ Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, To sing his praise, praise.

sing his praise, Your voic-es raise, Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, To sing his praise, praise.

cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, To sing his praise, To sing his praise, To sing his praise, praise.

voic-es raise, Ye cher-u-bim And ser-a-phin, \_\_\_\_\_ To sing his praise, praise.