

William Billings Sets The Tune

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his more unusual renderings, in particular, his attempts to word-paint the sound and meaning of some of the texts.³ Here we seek to determine his norm, what he did most of the time.

During his 25-year career as a singing master and psalmist, Billings composed more than 280 strophic settings of sacred poetry. Most of these are what one might call "ordinary" settings, in that they consist of one stanza of poetry set to a four-phrase melody. The poetry was most often cast in one of the standard metrical patterns of Anglo-American religious verse: Common Meter (C.M.; a stanza of four lines in iambic meter alternating eight and six syllables each), Long Meter (L.M.; four lines of eight syllables each, iambic meter), and Short Meter (S.M.; four lines of iambic meter, containing six, six, eight, and six syllables respectively). These three meters make up almost eighty percent of the poetry that Billings used in his strophic music: Common Meter is found in 106 pieces (36.8 percent), Long Meter in 83 pieces (28.8 percent), and Short Meter in 39 pieces (13.5 percent). Other metrical designs, the so-called Particular Meters, comprising some 28 different verse patterns, are found in only about 50 (20 percent) of his pieces.

Billings drew his texts from a variety of poets. J. Murray Barbour noted that "in the choice of his texts for his psalm tunes Billings allied himself with the most progressive church composers of his time."⁴ Although the psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts were just gaining wide acceptance when Billings began composing, he apparently threw his lot wholeheartedly with that poet—even to the extent of imitating Watts's rhythm, cadence, and imagery in Billings's own poetic efforts.⁵ Poetry by Watts far exceeds any other text source in Billings's strophic settings (84 pieces, 44 percent). *A New Version of the Psalms* by Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate is the next most frequently consulted source for texts. This was the authorized Anglican versification of the psalms, which superseded the "Old Version" of Sternhold and Hopkins in the early eighteenth century. Billings drew 27 pieces from the *New Version* (14 percent). James and John Rely, mentioned below in the discussion of HARTFORD, provided 18 texts (about 8 percent). Among a half dozen other British hymn-writers, only Charles Wesley, with five settings, contributed more than one or two poems. Eleven texts are anonymous but can be traced to British sources.

Billings himself accounted for the most hymns by American poets with 13 confirmed and another seven probable texts (about 10 percent). Perez Morton, a Boston poet and undoubtedly a friend of Billings, contributed seven poems, mostly to *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.⁶ Boston cleric Mather Byles supplied four poems, his late brother Samuel, one poem, and John Peck, an ambitious versifier of little talent, three poems. One hundred and twelve tunes, in *The New-England Psalm-Singer* and *Music in Miniature*, were published

In the beginning was the Word." This biblical metaphor aptly describes the close relationship between the text and the music in early American psalmody, particularly in the music of William Billings. The American psalmist began with a text that moved him, often one of the psalms or hymns of Isaac Watts. The subject of that text might range widely, from exalted praise of God to somber meditations on the transitoriness of human life, but the text was the starting point for the psalmist's work. He attempted to make his setting reflect the sense, the rhythm, and, in some cases, even the sound of the words he chose. His success in a particular setting depended on many factors, including his innate talent and musicality. Some composers were adept at capturing the spirit of the words; others seemed to lack the talent, imagination, or experience to deal effectively with textual issues. Few American composers were as successful at wedding the music to the words as was William Billings.

Billings's attitude toward the primacy of the words was made very clear in his first tunebook, *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (Boston, 1770), where he wrote: "You must endeavor to make the Musick conform to the Words; then they will serve to beautify each other."² The words he chose to set affected Billings's music in many ways. They influenced the form, meter, rhythm, texture, and imagery of his settings. In this study, we shall look at some Billings settings of religious poetry to see how he handled the sense, rhythm, and sound of the words. The emphasis will be on Billings's usual settings of text, not his exceptional ones. An earlier article discussed some of

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¹To set the tune in eighteenth-century psalmody meant to choose the melody for singing a psalm or hymn in public worship. This was normally the cherished responsibility of the head chorister or deacon in the church. The minister would usually read aloud the psalm to be sung, and the deacon or leader of the choir chose an appropriate tune to which to sing the words. Sometimes a tune would be selected that did not fit the meter of the psalm, usually causing disastrous results. See *The Complete Works of William Billings*, 4 vols. (Boston: American Musicological Society and Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-90), v.4, p.35, for Billings's humorous account of one such incident. Hereafter *The Complete Works of William Billings* will be cited as *WB* with the Roman numeral I to IV indicating the volume number.

²William Billings, *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (Boston, 1770), *WB*, p.27. Hereafter *The New-England Psalm-Singer* will be cited as *NEPS*.

³Karl Kroeger, "Word Painting in the Music of William Billings," *American Music* 6 (Spring 1988), pp.41-64.

⁴J. Murray Barbour, *The Church Music of William Billings* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p.1.

⁵Karl Kroeger, "William Billings and the Hymn Tune," *The Hymn* 37 (July 1986), p.22.

without words or even suggestions for a text.

Like most other American psalmists, Billings employed an additive method of composition. This method, discussed at some length in the introduction to volume 3 of *The Complete Works of William Billings*,⁷ is briefly summarized here to give the reader an understanding of Billings's approach to composition. In *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings noted that he had "read several Author's [sic] Rules on Composition."⁸ One writer he is sure to have studied closely is the British psalmist William Tans'ur. Several of Tans'ur's publications included rules for composing, mostly gleaned from Henry Purcell's emendations to John Playford's *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*, 12th ed. (London, 1694). In particular, Tans'ur's *The Royal Melody Compleat* (London, 1755) circulated widely in America during the 1760s, and musical and written evidence suggests that Billings was intimately familiar with it.⁹ Tans'ur's rules in *The Royal Melody Compleat*, the foundations of which rest in Renaissance contrapuntal practice, define basic melodic motion between two, three, and four parts, as well as the use of discords, cadences, canon, and fuge.

Billings briefly discussed his approach to composing in *The Continental Harmony*. In reply to a student's question about composing, the "Master" (Billings) replied:

Although I am not confined to rules prescribed by others, yet I come as near as possible to a set of rules which I have carved out for myself... The first part [i.e., the principal melody, assigned to the tenor voice] is nothing more than a flight of fancy, [and] the other parts are forced to comply and conform to that, by partaking of the same air [i.e., the rhythmic and melodic aspects of the tune], or, as much of it as they can get. But by reason of this restraint, the last parts are seldom so good as the first; for the second part [the bass] is subservient to the first, the third part [the treble] must conform to the first and second, and the fourth part [the counter or alto] must conform to the other three; therefore the grand difficulty in composition, is to preserve the air throughout each part separately, and yet cause them to harmonize with each other at the same time.¹⁰

Under this method, the principal melody was composed first; the bass voice was added following the rules of consonant counterpoint; the treble (or soprano) voice was then composed to conform to the other two, and finally the counter (or alto) voice was added to fill in harmony and smooth the sound. Although Billings described the principal melody as a "flight of fancy," meaning that no rules applied to it, nonetheless, he attempted, as noted earlier, "to make the Musick

conform to the Words."¹¹ By "partaking of the same air," the accompanying parts would also have singable melodies to sound against the main melody in the tenor.

The initial influence of the words on a Billings musical setting was to determine the mode of the music. Billings and other psalmists advocated the doctrine of setting "flat Keyed Tunes [i.e., minor mode] to melancholy words, and sharp Keyed Tunes [major mode] to chearful words."¹² Thus if the subject of the psalm or hymn were penance, prayer, death, judgment, contrition, etc., Billings would set the words to a tune in a minor key. In *The Continental Harmony*, Billings purported:

the impropriety of setting a *Hallelujah* in a flat key; the reader may observe, that the import of the word is, *Praise ye the Lord*.—Query, is it not very inconsistent to praise the Lord, in tones which are plaintive and prayerful? for certainly the words and the music, must contradict each other. N. B. This error I confess myself guilty of in a former publication, but upon more mature reflection, I heartily wish it were in my power to erase it.¹³

Similarly, if the subject, as suggested above, were praise, joy, majesty, thanksgiving, etc., Billings would choose a major mode for his setting.

The stanza structure of the poem also, to a large extent, determined the structure of the music. Generally, the phrases of the melody coincided with the lines of poetry, with a musical cadence occurring at the conclusion of each line. A four-line hymn would usually be set to four phrases of music. Since in most hymns a complete thought is presented in each stanza, the musical setting is framed to reflect the progress of the poetic idea. The first phrase of the melody usually moves away from the tonic pitch, the second and third phrases normally maintain a distance from the tonic, and the final phrase moves decisively back to the tonic. In this way, the final line of the poetry, which usually contains the crux of the poetic argument, receives reinforcement from the melodic and harmonic motion.

The musical setting of the syllables in each line is determined by the poetic meter. In iambic meter, by far the most common metrical foot in psalmody, the alternation of unaccented and accented syllables suggests the alternation of short and long time values. The accented syllables, placed on strong musical beats, would be given more time than the unaccented syllables. In this way, the structure and metric values of the poetry directly influenced the setting.

Billings set more strophic pieces in 3/2 time than any other musical meter. This musical meter was fairly fast, with a modern metronomic equivalent of 60 half-note beats per minute. The 3/2 meter lent itself admirably to the expression of the iambic poetic foot. The accented and unac-

⁶ Perez Morton, husband of the poet Sarah Wentworth Morton, was later the Attorney General for Massachusetts. He was identified in *NEPS* with the initials "P.M." See David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 49, 58.

⁷ *WBIII*, pp. xxxix-xliv.

⁸ *NEPS*, *WBI*, p. 32.

⁹ Karl Kroeger, "William Tans'ur's Influence on William Billings," *Inter-American Music Review* 11 (Spring-Summer 1991), pp. 1-12.

¹⁰ William Billings, *The Continental Harmony* (Boston, 1794), *WBIV*, p. 32. *The Continental Harmony* will hereafter be cited as *CH*.

¹¹ *NEPS*, *WBI*, p. 27.

¹² William Billings, *The Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston, 1778), *WBI*, p. 16.

¹³ *CH*, *WBIV*, p. 25.

BROOKFIELD

Watts Hymns III, No. 1

L.M.

'Twas on that dark, that dole-ful night, when pow'rs of

earth and hell a-rose a-against the son of

God's de-light, and friends be-tray'd him to his foes.

LEBANON

Billings

C.M.

Death with his war-rant in his hand comes rush-ing on a-main, We

must o-bey the sum-mons then, re-turn to dust a-gain.

cented syllables seem to fall naturally on the succession of whole notes and half notes in the music, starting with a half-note pickup for the initial unaccented syllable. BROOKFIELD is a typical example of Billings's standard triple-time setting of iambic verse.

BROOKFIELD sets Watts's somber poetic portrayal of the Last Supper. The minor mode and narrow melodic range (except for the third phrase) capture admirably the solemn nature of the event. After the first phrase, the succession of whole and half notes is enlivened by the division of the whole note into a dotted quarter, eighth, and half-note rhythm in the melody and accompanying voices. But this increased motion seems only to add poignancy to the setting. At 16 measures, BROOKFIELD represents Billings's standard setting of an L.M. text, two syllables per measure. Later compilers recognized BROOKFIELD's expressive qualities, for it was reprinted 88 times to 1810, more often than any other Billings piece.¹⁴

Billings set iambic poetry in duple musical meter almost as often as he used triple meter. The duple meter he used most often was the so-called "Third Mood of Common Time," represented in his tunebooks by the reversed C (either with or without a vertical line through it), here given as its modern equivalent, 2/2. Like 3/2, 2/2 had a fairly quick pace, with the same modern metronomic value: 60 half-note beats per minute. However, Billings shows more flexibility in his 2/2 settings of iambic meter than in his triple-time settings. Sometimes he treats the text in a way similar to 3/2, by assigning more time to the accented syllable in a proportion of three to one. At other times he treats the syllables as temporally equal, assigning them all half-note values, but placing accented syllables on beat one and unaccented syllables on beat two. A third way that Billings addresses the setting of iambic meter is to substitute a trochaic foot for the initial iamb. Instead of starting with a pickup, the music begins on beat one with an accented syllable. This often happens when the poet has begun the line with a strong word that does not lend itself to being a pickup. Such a situation is seen in Billings's LEBANON, set to a poem that Billings himself wrote.

The initial word, "death," is much too forceful to permit a pickup to the weaker words that follow. Thus Billings placed "death" on the first beat of the measure, reversing the poetic foot. The remaining phrases follow the iambic foot, allotting equal temporal emphasis to each syllable, but placing the accented syllable on the first beat of the measure. LEBANON is also one of Billings's more popular tunes, appearing in print some 48 times to 1810. At 15 measures in length, it typically represents his standard setting of a Common Meter text.

Poets wrote and Billings set fewer Short Meter texts than either of the other commonly used poetic meters. Only 39 pieces by Billings employ this meter. Like C.M. and L.M. poems, the text is

usually set two syllables per measure, resulting in a piece that is 13 measures long. A typical example of a Billings Short Meter tune is seen in CONNECTION.

Billings printed CONNECTION twice: once as a plain tune in *The Singing Master's Assistant*, and once as the illustrative frontispiece in *The Continental Harmony*. It contains several points of interest: while the tune in the tenor generally proceeds in half and quarter notes, the treble voice is more highly decorated, employing eighth notes, dotted eighths, and sixteenths. This is an unusual reversal of roles, where an accompanying voice shows greater rhythmic vitality than the main melody. The tempo of 3/4 time is about 80 quarter-note beats per minute. At the onset of the third line, Billings substitutes a trochaic foot for the expected iamb, and in the penultimate measure, he reverses the rhythmic values assigned to the strong and weak accents (a device sometimes found in triple-time tunes at the final cadence). This lends a slight feeling of broadening to the cadence. In keeping with the poetic mood of praise, Billings set the text in a major key. Although not one of Billings's most popular tunes, CONNECTION appeared in print about 10 times between 1778 and 1810.

While most of Billings's text choices involved the three common meters of Anglo-American poetry, he did not confine himself solely to those patterns. Poets, even the eloquent but orthodox Isaac Watts, wrote some verses in other meters. Since these texts were designed to be sung in public worship services, composers and compilers were obliged to provide music for them. These non-standard meters were collectively referred to as "Particular Meter," and their metrical patterns and verse structure could be extremely varied.¹⁴ Only one was referred to with a more or less standard designation: Hallelujah Meter (H.M.; 6.6.6.6.4.4.4.4 in iambic meter). This was perhaps the most common of the Particular Meters, although 8.8.8.8.8 and 8.8.6.8.8.6 were also frequently found. Billings composed 10 different tunes designed to accommodate Hallelujah Meter. Many of them follow the model seen in AMHERST, by far his most popular tune in this meter, printed some 74 times between 1770 and 1810.

Several noteworthy details in AMHERST invite comment. First, the natural partition of the poem into two parts, the first consisting of four lines of six syllables, and the second, four lines of four syllables, invites a similar structural division in the music. This bipartition is emphasized by the rep-

¹⁴ Richard Crawford, *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody* (Madison: A-R Editions, 1984), p.xxviii. Numbers of printings of other tunes discussed in this study come either from Crawford's work or from my database of printings of American tunes between 1770 and 1820.

¹⁵ Amos Pillsbury's *The United States Sacred Harmony* (Boston, 1799) includes tunes in 45 different Particular Meters, noting that "the Compiler has endeavoured to accommodate Tunes to all the different sorts of Metres, for sacred worship, extant" (p.[2]).

CONNECTION

Watts Psalm 48

Great is the Lord our God, and let his praise be great.
He makes the church - es his a - bode, his most de - light-ful seat.

AMHERST

New Version Psalm 136

H.M.

To God the might - y Lord, your joy - ful thanks re - peat:
to him due praise af - ford, as good as he is great.
For God does prove our con - stant friend, his bound - less love shall nev - er end.

HARTFORD

James Relly

P.M. (85 85 88 85)

Glo - rious Je - sus! Glo - rious Je - sus! Thy dear name to praise;

this shall please us, this shall please us, Great - ly all our days:

Oh thy beau - ties, how di - vine! How they in the Gos - pel shine!

Ho - ly Sav - iour, live for - ev - er all our songs be thine.

etition of the second part, and with a different musical treatment: irregular musical declamation. Second, the substitution of the trochaic foot at the beginning of each phrase in the first part, while slightly distorting the natural accents of the text, adds strength and character to the melodic lines. Again, the major key of the music reflects the sense of the text: praise and thanksgiving.

Billings apparently enjoyed the flow and cadence of Particular Meter hymns—some of his most novel settings employ them—e.g., JUDEA, BALTIMORE, HOPKINTON, and RESURRECTION. However, as a practical psalmist attempting to accommodate the everyday needs of singers, Billings did not set unusual meters very often. An exception to this is found in *The Suffolk Harmony* (Boston, 1786), where settings of 18 poems by James and John Relly are printed. Many of the hymns of the Relly brothers, founders of Universalism, an offshoot of Methodism, employ Particular Meters, some so odd that few common tunes can be found to accommodate them. Billings chose to set only the Particular Meter poems from James Relly's *Christian Hymns* (London, 1758; repr. Burlington, NJ, 1776). Just why Billings set these particular texts is unknown, but circumstances suggest that it may have been at the request of Rev. John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, who had a church in Boston. Lacking tunes for singing many of Relly's most fervent hymns, Murray may have asked Billings (they were most likely acquainted) to set those meters for which tunes were hard to find. Billings published several pieces in *Singing Master's Assistant* and *Psalm-Singer's Amusement*, but drew all of his Relly settings together in *The Suffolk Harmony*. Perhaps he hoped to realize significant sales of the tunebook among the Universalists, for most hymns in Relly's collection could be sung to music in that tunebook.¹⁶

Billings's settings of the Relly poems are some of his most subtle musical inventions. Taking the words, as always, as his point of departure, Billings closely aligned sound, rhythm, and texture to produce pieces that are aptly characterized by McKay and Crawford as "lovely part-songs on religious texts."¹⁷ Although printed only six times, HARTFORD well represents Billings's approach to these Particular Meter hymns.

Compared with the previous examples, HARTFORD seems almost to have been composed by some other composer than Billings. Few musical characteristics seen in BROOKFIELD, LEBANON, OR AMHERST are found in HARTFORD. The strongest, and perhaps the sole, connection is a tuneful, singable melody. HARTFORD seems fashioned to bring out all of the novel aspects of the words and meter. Extensive use of antiphony is its most obvious feature: rarely do two adjacent phrases have the same vocal scoring. Solo, duet, and trio textures alternate with full four-part harmony to create a constantly shifting flow of vocal weights and colors. The four-part scoring is largely reserved for

¹⁶ WBIII, p.22. A collection of Universalist hymns published in Boston in 1792 specifically recommends eight Billings tunes from *The Suffolk Harmony* for singing various Particular Meter hymns.

¹⁷ McKay and Crawford, p.150.

¹⁸ For example, CAMDEN includes stanzas from Watts's Psalms 104 and 148; JORDAN, stanzas 1 and 3 from Watts's *Hymns*, Book 2, No.66; MILTON, stanzas from both Sternhold and Hopkins's Psalm 145 and Brady and Tate's versification of the same psalm; STOCKBRIDGE, Watts Psalm 17, v.1, followed by vv.1-2 and 6 from Brady and Tate's Psalm 95.

¹⁹ For the final two stanzas, see WBIII, p.80-81.

²⁰ WBIV, p.33.

²¹ WBI, p.27.

cadential gestures, where its greater weight can add emphasis and a sense of finality to the phrases. The musical form is also unusual in psalmody: AA' B A", with the final A" repeated.

Some of Billings's strophic settings employ more than a single stanza of text. Some set two stanzas or more, sometimes even non-consecutive stanzas. A few others combine stanzas from different poems to create a more focused poetic utterance.¹⁸ In these pieces, Billings was obviously attempting to expand the range of strophic settings and give himself greater scope for musical expression. One of his most effective and characteristic multiple stanza settings is GOLGOTHA, first published in his *Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (Boston, 1781). Here the sound and meaning of the words play a major role in defining the nature of the setting. The first stanza is set in solemn two- and three-measure phrases, which convincingly portray the gravity and significance of the words. In the second half of the tune, the music reflects the different character of the poetic thought, the regular quarter-note declamation of which contrasts persuasively with the static solemnity of the first part. While the remaining two stanzas in the four-stanza hymn fit the music for the first two stanzas less than flawlessly, they still make both musical and aesthetic sense when sung to Billings's music.¹⁹

This study has attempted to demonstrate how William Billings most often approached the setting of strophic religious poetry in his psalm and hymn tunes. Starting with the text, Billings allowed his "fancy" full range to find and fashion a melody that seemed not only to fit the accents and rhythm, but also to project the meaning of the text he chose to set. Rarely did his melodic wellspring let him down, and seldom did he need to set a text more than once. After he had sculpted his melody, he fashioned the accompanying voices, following the rules of consonant counterpoint, "to preserve the air through each part separately, and yet cause them to harmonize with each other at the same time."²⁰ The music had to conform to the words, so that "then they will serve to beautify each other."²¹ The wide popularity of Billings's music, both during his lifetime and for several decades after his death in 1800, testifies both to his talent and to his success in "setting the tune." ■

GOLGOTHA

Watts Hymns II, No. 63

C.M.

Hark! from the tombs a dole-ful sound, my ears at -

tend the cry: "Ye liv- ing men come view the ground,

where you must short- ly lie. Prin- ces, this clay must

be your bed, in spite of all your tow'rs! The tall, the wise, the

rev- erend head, must lie as low as ours."