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Alan C. Buechner

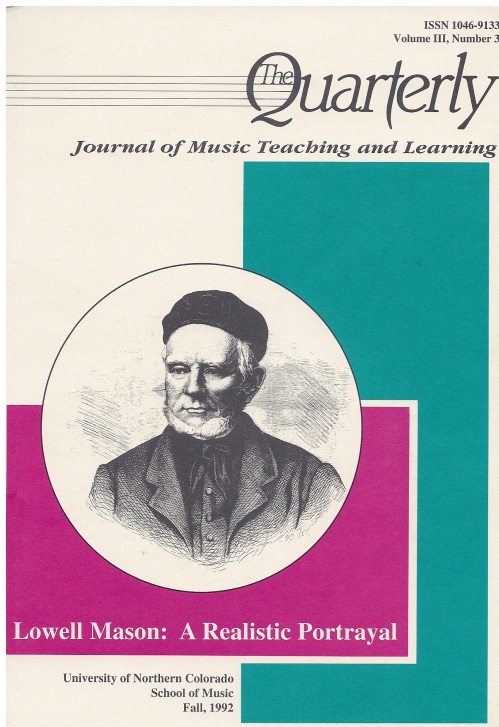
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It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

Lowell Mason: *Not* the “Father of Singing Among the Children”

By Alan C. Buechner

Queens College, City University of New York

The late Irving Lowens was the first scholar to challenge Arthur Lowndes Rich's characterization of Mason as “the Father of Singing Among the Children.” On the basis of his research into the origins of the first music textbook to be published in Colonial America, namely the Reverend John Tufts' *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes* (Boston, 1721), Lowens concluded that, if Mason were the “Father of Singing Among the Children,” Tufts logically was the grandfather of this remarkable development.

The basis for Lowens' conclusion was a single line of text included in an advertisement for the first edition of Tufts' little pamphlet. The ad was printed in the *Boston News-Letter* for January 2-9, 1721:

A Small Book containing 20 Psalm Tunes, with Directions how to Sing them, contrived in the most easy Method ever yet Invented, for the ease of Learners, whereby even Children, or People of the Meanest Capacities, may come to sing them by Rule, may serve as an Introduction to a more compleat Treatise of Singing, which will speedily be published. To be Sold by Samuel Gerrish Bookseller, near the Brick Church in Cornhill, Price 6d.¹

Unfortunately, Lowens did not pursue this part of his investigation further, since his principal objective was to disentangle the publication histories of Tufts' *Introduction* and its more substantial rival, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*, by the Reverend Thomas Walter, which was also published by Gerrish in 1721.

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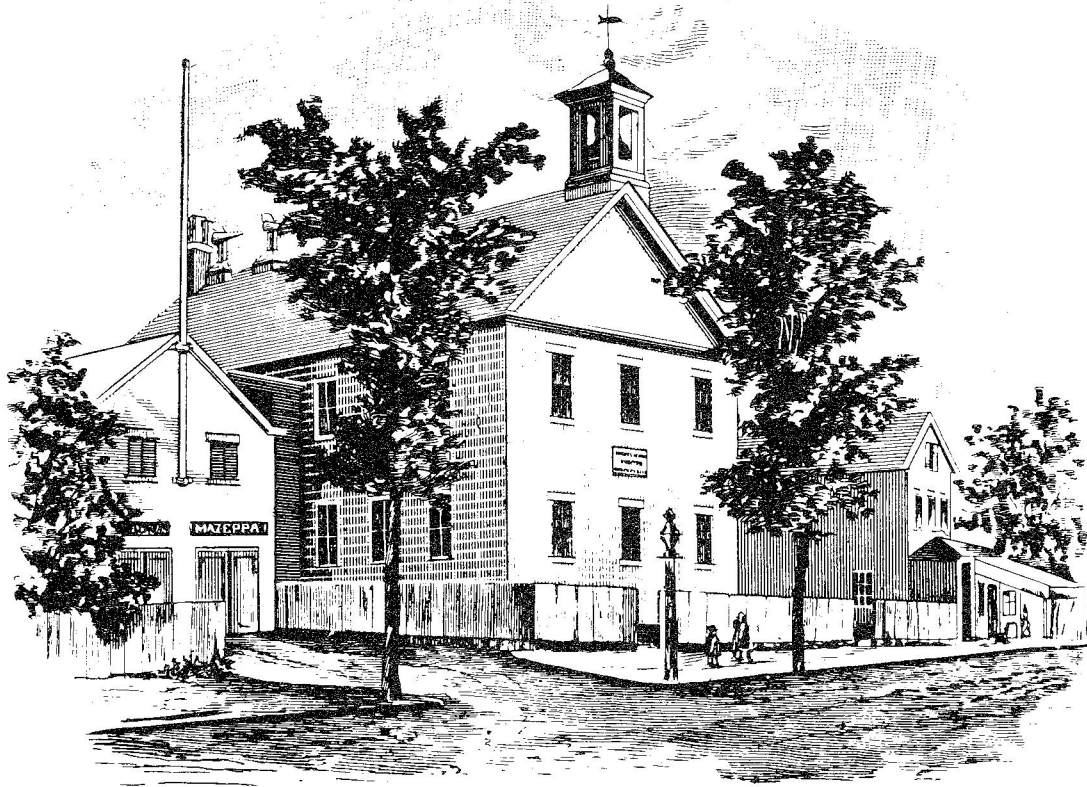
When Lowens' conclusion regarding Mason and Tufts is examined critically, it is clear that it rests solely upon the assumption that the line “even Children, or People of the Meanest Capacities,” was more than promotional hype, and that Tufts really was concerned about teaching children as well as their elders to sing from notation. Yet it is just as reasonable to suppose that this phrase was little more than a figure of speech used in place of a long, technical description of Tufts' methodological innovation, namely the utilization of fasola solmization letters (F,S,L) in place of their respective note-heads as an aid to reading.

The advertisement for the first edition of Walter's book, published in the *Boston News-Letter* for May 15-22, 1721, sheds little light on the matter:

Just published and to be Sold by Samuel Gerrish, The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained: Or, an Introduction to the Art of Singing by Rote, Fitted to the Meanest Capacities. By the Rd. T. Walter, M.A. Recommended by the Ministers of Boston, and Others. With a Collection of Psalm Tunes in 3 parts, Printed from Copper Plate, Engraved with great Curiosity & Exactness...²

Perusal of this publication's contents reveals it to be conventional for its time and place, employing, as it does, standard diamond-shaped notation. Its author makes few concessions to those of the “Meanest Capacities” other than to treat the “Gamut” and the “Moods of Time” with great thoroughness.

Who, then, in practice, were these “People of Meanest Capacities?” One of Tufts' and Walter's fellow reformers, the Reverend Thomas Symmes, supplied the answer in his tract, *The Reasonableness of Regular Singing* (Boston, 1720). In regard to the establish-



OLD HAWES SCHOOL HOUSE.

The old Hawes School House, South Boston, named in honor of John Hawes who gave the land in 1819 for a public market and consented in 1823 to the erection of a schoolhouse instead. The school was the site of Lowell Mason's experimental year of teaching, 1837-38, at no cost to the City of Boston. This led directly to the introduction in 1838 of music into the curricula of all the city's grammar and writing schools. This engraving, by an unknown artist, was the frontispiece of *The Hawes School Memorial* (Boston: David Clapp, 1889). Credit: *The Boston School Committee, and Music Library, University of Maryland at College Park.*

ment of singing schools, he argued:

Would this not be an innocent and profitable recreation, and would it not have a tendency to divert young people, who are most proper to learn, from learning *idle, foolish*, yes, pernicious *songs* and *ballads*, and banish all such trash from their minds? Experience proves this.³

It must be remembered that this was an age when popular music, as we know it, hardly existed, its place being occupied by folk music of all kinds. Symmes' appeal for a better quality of "youth music" has a modern ring about it.

Symmes did not have long to wait. A Society for Promoting Regular Singing in the Worship of God was established in Boston at about the time that Tufts's and Walter's

books were first published. With membership drawn from neighboring towns, it was an important spur to the development of singing schools throughout the region.⁴

The historical record of the first singing schools is remarkably complete. There is abundant evidence that the ministers' earliest appeals were addressed to the "young people" in their congregations and that the response of these teenagers was enthusiastic. Unfortunately for Lowens' conclusion, there is no direct evidence that Tufts,

Walter, and their followers went out of their way to instruct children separately or to include them with their older siblings when musical instruction was offered. That development was to come later, as "Singing by

Rule” and the singing-school movement became more firmly established.

The failure to provide musical instruction specifically for children was soon corrected by Tufts’ and Walter’s successors in Boston. The first man of record to do so placed the following advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* for July 9-16, 1739:

WHEREAS JOHN WAGHORNE, now resident in Boston, has been often requested by some of the principal Gentlemen of this Town, to instruct their Children in Vocal Psalmody, with a Promise of Encouragement; and he having now a suitable House for that Purpose, therefore is to inform such Persons who will think proper to send their Children, that said Waghorne intends to Instruct Youth in the Gamut and Measure of Notes &c according to the Method of the famous Dr. Crafts [sic] late Organist and Composer to his Majesty’s Chappel, and will attend on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 4 to 6 o’Clock in the afternoon.⁵

While Waghorne’s methodological preferences are clearly not those of the Puritan reformers, his activities supplied a precedent for other music instructors, such as Abia Holbook and Jacob Bucknam who, respectively, taught singing schools for children in 1744 and 1768.

By 1770, the singing-school movement was in full swing throughout New England. Virtually every town had, or would soon have, its youth choir whose performances of fusing tunes, set pieces, and anthems composed by Yankee singing masters graced the worship services at the meeting house on the Sabbath and on special occasions such as ordinations and dedications.

Led by amateur “choristers” chosen from the ranks of the most able singers, these choirs experienced the same successes and failures that church choirs do today. New singers had to be recruited and trained each year, as older singers married and retired to the pews. New repertory had to be found, as singers grew tired of singing the same tunes over and over again.



Originally an engraving by Taylor-Adams, this representation of an eighteenth-century singing school master appeared on the cover of a songbook entitled *Father Kemp’s Old Folks Concert Music* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Company, 1874). The original appearance includes the phrases “Should auld acquaintance be forgot” and “All please sound.” Credit: Bruce D. Wilson.

In many cases, the solution to these problems was to hire an itinerant singing master who specialized in training the very young, refurbishing the skills of the more experienced, and teaching the latest tunes published in the many tune-books then available. Ever mindful of the need to maximize his meager earnings from teaching and aware of the desirability of beginning musical instruction at as early an age as possible, the master recruited both children and teenagers, teaching them separately, the former in the afternoon and the latter in the evening.

A case in point is that of a singing master active in Salem, Massachusetts, who was very possibly one of four brothers known to have been active in music at this time. In the September 14, 1775, issue of the *Essex Gazette*, he placed the following advertisement:

MR. MUNSON

Respectfully acquaints the Gentlemen and Ladies of the Town of Salem that he opens a Singing School this day, at the Assembly Room, where Parents and other Subscribers are desired to send their Children at 5 o'Clock P.M., and the Young Gentlemen and Ladies to attend at seven in the Evening. N.B. Subscriptions are taken in at Mr. Samuel Field's in School Street and at the Printing Office.⁶

Munson's practice of assigning his students to classes on the basis of age seems to have been fairly widespread at the time. Elisha West, the composer-compiler of the tunebook *The Musical Concert* (1807), active in Woodstock, VT, from 1791-1807, was remembered for having done the same thing during his sojourn there.

Daniel Read, a New Haven singing master-composer and a contemporary of Munson and West, was the first music teacher to write an instruction book specifically designed for use by children. Although no copies of this volume are known to have survived, some idea of its contents may be gleaned from Read's advertisement of it, which was published in the March 17, 1790, issue of the *Connecticut Journal*:

An Introduction to Psalmody, or the Child's Instructor in Vocal Music. Containing a Series of Familiar Dialogues, under the following heads, viz. Psalmody in General, Stave, Musical Letters and Cliffs, an Exercise for the Bass, an Exercise for the Tenor or Treble, an Exercise for the Counter, Tones, Semi-tones, Flats,

Sharps, and Naturals, Solfaing, Transposition, &c. the Several Notes and Rests, and their Proportion, the Several Moods of Time, Several other Characters used in Music, Key Notes, &c. Pitching Tunes &c. Graces. Illustrated with Copper Plates. By D. Read. Printed for, and sold by the Author, New Haven, 1790.⁷

That such a formidable regimen was imposed upon children was, perhaps, symptomatic of the times. The point is that music instruction of children was evidently widespread enough in Read's day to warrant the investment of hard cash in the production of teaching materials specifically designed for their use.

Read was not alone in this. Solomon Howe of Northampton, Massachusetts, published two instruction books, *The Worshipper's Assistant* (1799) and *The Farmer's Evening Entertainment* (1807) in which he offered suggestions to parents and singing masters in regard to the best way to go about the musical education of children.

Howe's advice concerning which age groups should be assigned to particular musical parts is germane to the present discussion. In *The Farmer's Evening Entertainment*, he admonishes singing masters to restrict the counter (in modern usage, the alto part) to the unchanged voices of children of both sexes:

...the Teacher (should) be very careful to get the highest and clearest voices, at 7, 8, or 10 year's age, males or females, for Counter; which should always be sung, with what is call'd a child's voice, viz, as little children naturally sing at 7, &c. before they learn to imitate a woman's voice...⁸

He went on to justify this advice on the ground that:

There should be an almost inexpressible delicacy in pronouncing, accenting, emphasizing, and cadecizing, the Counter...⁹

Howe believed that this quality of sound could be obtained only by using the voices of children. As a final justification, he argued that, if both the counter and the treble were sung by women, the beauty of the music would be lost.

How special were Howe's views? While they were, indeed, idiosyncratic, they were congruent with the practice of other singing masters who regularly assigned the counter to the boys, apparently as part of an enlight-

ened policy which kept them singing throughout voice change.

This was standard practice for Jacob Kimball, the composer-compiler of *The Rural Harmony* (Boston, 1793). One of his former students, when reviewing his youthful musical experiences for his memoirs, fondly recalled how he and his chums, barely age 13, had carried the day singing counter in a Selby anthem conducted by Kimball at the dedication of a meeting house in Danvers, Massachusetts. After a successful performance, their teacher called them “brave boys,” but whether he considered them to be “children” or “young masters” is not known.¹⁰

A Salem preacher, the Reverend William Bentley, an avid diarist and musical dilettante of the time, kept a detailed record of a singing school, which he sponsored in 1792. Excerpts from this account provide further insight into this matter:

Jan. 2, 1792. Notified publicly the intention to open a new Singing School on Wednesday for young persons from 12 years & upward.

Jan. 9, 1792. Went about to induce parents to send their young children to the Singing School. There was a plausible reception, which at least was flattering.

Jan. 11, 1792. This evening for the first time our new Singing School was opened. 40 youths of both sexes appeared, & with the addition of some old scattered singers a good prospect opens.

Jan. 13, 1792. A Singing School again this evening. Prospect yet good, tho' the weather very unfavorable to the meeting of young people.

Jan 20, 1792. ...very pleasant day. No bad news yet from the effects of the storm in our neighborhood. No damage in the harbour. The snow lays in vast drifts of eight to ten feet, against the houses, fences, &c. Market well supplied. A List of the Young Masters Misses at the Singing School this evening: (N.B.: 45 names, 27 males and 18 females, follow.)¹¹

A later entry suggests that those with changed voices were taught separately.

March 23, 1792. Our School for singing goes on, the bass, & the young school alternately.¹²

Bentley's singing school concluded the following August. By the time that it was over, he had characterized its singing scholars as “young persons,” “young children,” “youths of both sexes,” “young people,” and “young Masters and Misses,” almost interchangeably, the only qualifier being that all scholars had to be at least 12 years of age in order to participate.

Evidence such as this strongly supports the hypothesis that children and adolescents were taught to sing in ever-increasing numbers at singing schools for at least two generations prior to the advent of public school music. Moreover, it suggests that this practice, while not necessarily universal, was quite common in New England, Rich not withstanding.

Inquiry into how Rich came to credit Mason with the establishment of singing among children provides insight both into his scholarly method and into Mason's unique talent for self-promotion.

The most likely source of Rich's characterization was Mason himself. In an *Address on Church Music* delivered at Boston in 1851, Mason baldly stated:

Singing among children, as a common thing, was unknown in this country. There were few who, with remarkable ear and voice, had given some attention to the subject, or rather who, without having given attention to it, were singers, but children did not generally sing, nor was it supposed to be possible to teach them or that they had the ability to sing.¹³

While such a statement was undoubtedly accepted uncritically by Mason's audience, it cries out for analysis now.

Singing masters and singing schools aside, Mason's view is antithetical to established fact in the field of American folk music. Historically speaking, the children of the people have always sung, if only because adults took the time to sing to them.

A case in point is a charming, miniature book designed to fit into the hands of a small child, *Tommy Thumb's Song Book for All Little Masters and Misses*, published by Isaiah Thomas at Worcester, Massachusetts in 1788. It comprises classic nursery rhymes such as “Oranges and Lemons,” “The Cat and the Fiddle,” and “Who Killed Cock Robin?” which, according to its anonymous editor,

were to be sung by all good nurses to the children in their care until such a time as they could sing for themselves.

The editor's admonition, reflecting general practice, was widely followed, as evidenced by the findings of later-day scholars. One of the earliest collections of American folk songs of any kind was William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children*, published in 1883. Important collections since then, such as Elois Hubbard Linscott's *Folk Songs of Old New England* (New York, 1939), almost invariably include the folk songs and singing games of children along with more adult fare.

Mason could not be faulted for not knowing the work of Newell and Linscott, but he had only to roam the streets, as Newell did, to find children singing everywhere. But Mason can be faulted for denying the commonplace practices of his musical forebears and ignoring the musical associations of his own youth.

Mason's grandfather, Barachias Mason (Harvard, 1742), taught singing schools. His father, Colonel Johnson Mason, was a village school master, manufacturer of straw bonnets, bass-viol player, and a choral singer. A relative, Libbeus Smith, was a singing master. At age 13, Mason attended a singing school taught by Amos Albee, a neighbor and author of the *Norfolk Collection of Church Music*, published in 1805. At 18, Mason composed an ordination anthem under the tutelage of Albee.

Significantly, Mason was not above entertaining his peers by playing the flute and the clarinet on the steps of the meeting house on a summer's evening. He also visited neighboring singing schools, where he helped out by playing the cello.¹⁴ These were standard instruments in the gallery orchestras which, in the absence of pipe organs, accompanied the village choirs of his youth. We may conclude that Mason's exposure to common musical practice was considerable.

Given such a personal history, it seems unlikely that he was ignorant of the efforts made by earlier singing masters on behalf of children. Indeed, the likelihood is strong that he was well aware of them, as seems clear from another statement he made in his 1851 *Address*:

Knowing by experience the value of an alto of children's voices in a church choir, and finding that this part was not usually sung or even attempted in Boston choirs, it became an immediate object to train a class of boys and girls in it. Hence the first children's singing school.¹⁵

It was apparently no accident that the title of an early and important public school music publication (co-authored with G. J. Webb) was *The Juvenile Singing School* (Boston, 1837).

The story of Mason's selective memory does not end there. Nathaniel Duren Gould, a New Hampshire singing master and the author of a very uneven book, *Church Music in America*, published in Boston in 1853, took Mason to task for the above assertion. He insisted that credit for teaching the first juvenile singing schools in New England rightly belonged to him, since he had initiated them as early as 1824 in Boston, Cambridge, and Charlestown. Gould declared that Mason had adopted this plan of instruction and made it the basis for his successful campaign to have music added to the curriculum in the Boston Public Schools.

Settlement of this dispute now, 140 years after the fact, is a fruitless task, given the obscurity of the relevant primary sources. Nor is it really necessary.

Mason, like Gould, based his work upon established custom when he initiated music classes for children. If there are to be any regrets about his behavior, let them be that this great man did not have it in his heart graciously to acknowledge his indebtedness to others.

In this respect, Mason was no different from the other musical reformers of his generation. They were self-made men who preferred to call themselves "professors of music" rather than "singing masters," if only to emphasize their ties to European traditions.

Their stock in trade was to denounce the old in order to promote the new. (Mason's sometime-collaborator, Thomas Hastings, comes to mind.) They found eager followers among a public that wholeheartedly believed in the progressive improvement of society. For these were the people who supported in succession the development of Sunday schools, the reform of the nation's drinking habits, the establishment of missionary soci-

eties, and eventually the abolition of slavery.

The addition of music to an expanding public school curriculum, which came about chiefly as a result of Mason's labors, was part of that larger picture. Beyond a doubt, Mason knowingly built upon what had gone before.

Endnotes

1. Quoted by Irving Lowens. "John Tufts's *Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes* (1721-1744): The First American Music Text-book, *Music and Musicians in Early America*, (New York, 1964), 41.

2. Quoted by Alan Buechner. "Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1720-1800, unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1960, 67.

3. Quoted by Buechner, op. cit., 112.

4. Buechner, op. cit., 78-87.

5. Quoted by Robert Francis Seybolt, *The*

Private Schools of Colonial Boston (Cambridge, 1935), 27.

6. Quoted by Buechner, op. cit., 172.

7. Quoted by Buechner, op. cit., 173.

8. Quoted by Buechner, op. cit., 230-231.

9. Ibid.


10. Buechner, op. cit., 231-232.

11. Quoted by Buechner, op. cit., 174-175. Records kept by Bentley of a singing school that he sponsored in 1789 reveal that most of the boys were apprentices in the nautical trades: shipwright, boat builder, ropemaker, cooper, and smith. Apprentices to a baker and a shoemaker were also included.

12. Ibid.

13. Lowell Mason. *An Address on Church Music, delivered July 8, 1851, in Boston* (New York, Mason and Law, 1851).

14. Arthur Lowndes Rich. *Lowell Mason, "The Father of Singing Among the Children"* (Chapel Hill, 1946), 5-7.

15. Mason, op. cit. 

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