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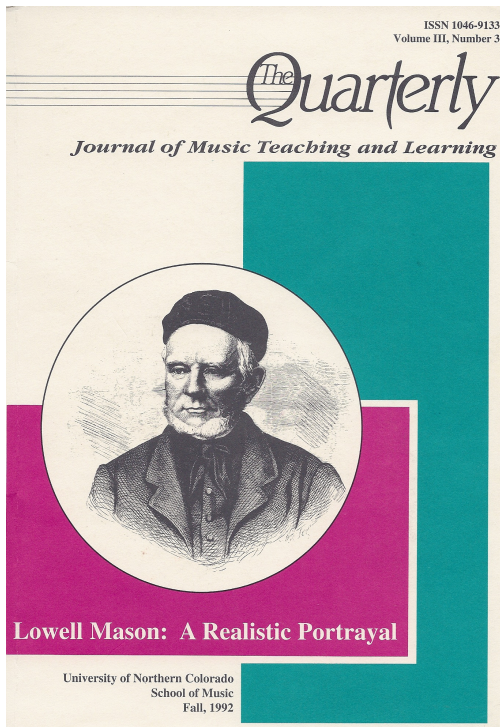
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*It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of 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.*

# The Enigma Of The Mason Hymn-Tunes

By George Brandon

*Davis, California*

**B**orn into a family of active amateur musicians, Lowell Mason attended singing schools conducted by local figures such as Amos Albee and Oliver Shaw. This gave him direct contact with some of the earlier musical traditions of New England. In addition, Mason's later experience as conductor of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society gave him an intimate practical knowledge of the extant repertoire.

However, Mason seems to have escaped being a mere clone of the older generation or of his contemporaries. Even before his two trips to Europe, his frame of reference was broader than that of almost any of his acquaintances; he planned for the future, taking into account not only the present and the recent past, but the more distant past as well. Mason had a deep sense of being an active participant in the continuity of the Christian tradition, which in Mason's case included the nineteenth-century belief that "the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand," and that the world was on the verge of a glorious new age. So Mason was both "backward looking" and "forward looking."

In fact, it appears that Mason was influenced to an even greater degree by people his own age, or younger, than he was by his elders. Possibly the most notable of these younger men was his own son William (born in 1829), perhaps the chief of Lowell's many collaborators. William studied music theory in Leipzig and piano under Liszt, knew Brahms and Wagner, and was closely associated with Lowell up to the time of Lowell's death in 1872, when the two were working together on a harmony textbook (still unpublished).

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Many younger men of Mason's time, including J. S. Dwight and A. W. Thayer, probably looked upon Lowell Mason as an elder statesman of the profession; these younger associates seemed to carry on a continuing campaign to help fill in the gaps in Mason's professional expertise and to see that he kept up to date on current developments in music. Thus, Lowell Mason's close association with both older and younger musicians, plus his avid study of all the music and musical literature that he could get his hands on, made it almost certain that he would be very much aware of musical developments from the late Middle Ages to the most current musical events of his day.

## Musical Philosophy

What did Mason gain from such a broad spectrum of domestic and foreign musical mentors? Two basic convictions: First, music must be practical and "of the people;" second, there is a right way to do things, which he intended to discover and follow. His musical styles reflect this orientation. His convictions forced him to compose according to accepted ("scientific") standards, but at the same time to compose for the people and places and institutions with which he felt familiar.

In regard to harmony and part-writing, this meant an overall concern for chord patterns that were convincing and satisfying for both listeners and performers; melodies that seemed natural and effective, and that were enjoyable for the active participants and the audiences; bass parts that, where possible, provided more than passive support for the musical superstructure; inner voice-parts that were neither deady dull nor intimidating in their technical demands; and rhythms that were vital and compelling, while at the same time simple enough not to upstage the text

or bewilder the inexperienced. It all had to “work”—whether it was performed by gargantuan groups (as at the Boston Peace Jubilee in 1872), or by the village organist, or by the tower bells of a great city church on Christmas Eve, or by a few mourners at a burial service, or by an individual singing in utter solitude out on the western frontier.

Some complained that Mason’s music was too simple and commonplace; and that it lacked glamour. They believed that as soon as American composers were better educated and had become more sophisticated, the hymn-tunes of Mason would be consigned to the attic. Others complained that Mason was trying to make musical snobs out of plain Americans who were happy with their old-time fuguing tunes, folk-like revival songs, and shape-note tunes.

Mason seems to have assumed that most people were on the side of “progress.” He proceeded to develop methods and materials that he felt would facilitate such progress by giving the general population some musical common ground that would provide an enduring basis for future personal and social development.

The belief that Mason’s harmonic language depended basically on the three primary triads (with a limited amount of simple modulation) has some validity. But it is a mistake to assume that a basic vocabulary of I-IV-V chords

means that every tune in the key of G simply plods along harmonized with nothing but G, C, and D triads. Even if a piece modulates only to closely related keys (i.e., to the key of C or D Major, or to the tonic-minor or relative-minor of any of these keys), the supply of chords is not meager but includes at least the following: G Major, G minor, A Major, A minor, B minor, C Major, C minor, D Major, D minor, E minor. My contention is that Mason’s musical training and wide expe-

rience as an extremely active musical leader made him fully aware of this array of easy-to-reach harmonies, but that he deliberately chose to err in the direction of restraint and self-denial rather than risk over-taxing the abilities of the public for whom he wrote.

Mason was not out to challenge the great composers of the past or of his own day, but rather to help bring America into the mainstream of the music of Western civilization so that the young nation could one day take its

rightful place in the life of the larger world of music. To this end, he began with the most elementary forms of education and repertory that he felt were needed by the American public, thus preparing the way for future generations to compete on a world-class basis for recognition and glory. He published music—including his own compositions—for the people with whom he worked in the community, in the schools, in the churches, and at home.

Mason usually avoided chromaticism in his own writing. This may have saved his music from most of the controversial “emotionalism” that some later musicians found unattractive in the music of many of Mason’s contemporaries. He may be criticized as being too plain or overly straightforward or even downright pedantic, but

hardly as being “vulgarly pious” or “blatantly effective.” What Mason wrote, at least what we know of the available works, was utility music of the highest degree of reliability, much of which even today can be useful to the great majority of the population.

We must remember, however, that we know virtually nothing about the styles in which Mason improvised, and that in Mason’s day even the playing of a hymn often involved improvising an interlude after each verse. His

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heritage as an organist would almost have guaranteed that his *extempore* performances on that instrument (either for a few friends or in a public worship service) would at least occasionally carry him beyond his usual sober and decorous manner.

It is true that Mason was self-taught, but only in the sense that it was Mason himself who was responsible for programming his life-long education process. He is said to have commented in later years that he had learned as much after age 46 as he had before age 46. His educational experiences were varied and continuous, but not haphazard. He basically mapped out a career and followed through on his plans, and to a large extent accomplished what he set out to do: Mason reshaped the musical life of America, with an eye to the future as he envisioned it.

### **Assessment of Mason's Place in Musical History**

The music of Horatio Parker and many other later "cultivated" composers has faded and perhaps is now on the verge of a revival, while the music of William Billings, folk hymns, and shape-note music have already become objects of enthusiastic cults. But who can imagine a revival of Lowell Mason's music, or the development of a Lowell Mason cult? For Mason's work is an ingrained part of our common culture and is taken for granted. The inherited standard tunes that Mason helped to make part of the perennial hymnic repertory are seldom thought of as being part of his contribution to our musical life, while to many his hymn-tunes seem prosaic and insignificant.

The real extent and character of Mason's contribution to the potential American hymn-tune repertory is not known with any degree of exactness. His output is said to have included well over 1,500 hymn-tunes—some original, some merely arranged, some radically adapted. However, only a handful remain generally known today. The problem is not merely that the hymn-tunes have never been organized in an accessible multi-volume anthology, but that the books in which they are to be found are scattered and not easily accessible. Some tunes are included only in old books using crude, misleading,

obsolete musical layout and typography. Any discussion of Mason's music based on the contents of such collections is likely to be incomplete and possibly inaccurate. Ultimately, we are forced to depend on the few Mason tunes that have become routine items in many commonplace collections of hymns and tunes, and in some instances practically part of oral tradition.

Another problem in evaluating Mason's hymn-tunes is that the attributions in such tune collections tend to be extremely unreliable, due to the prevailing lack of detail, accuracy, and uniformity in the attributions (i.e., names of the composers and/or sources), and in the lack of adequate indexes, lack of standardization of tune-names, and the extent to which varied forms of the same music circulated anonymously or under fictitious names. Mason's tunes have evolved almost like folk songs, appearing in a variety of forms in different tune-books and hymnals, subject to the alterations of compilers, editors, and arrangers. In addition, Mason himself, like many other composers, was constantly revising his own music. Therefore, no matter how well we think we know the hymn-tunes of Lowell Mason, it is wise to take into account the possibility that we may have been misled by faulty information. The results of exploration into the world of Lowell Mason's hymn-tunes will inevitably be tentative and unclear in regard to many critical details. The best we can hope for is a reasonable assessment based on experience and intuition, guided by as much logical analysis as we can muster, plus an acquaintance with what appear to be the most authentic examples at our disposal.

### **Harmonic Vocabulary**

Mason wrote (and/or arranged, adapted) at least five different types of hymn-tunes:

(1) The classic hymn-tune, based on the models of the Lutheran chorale and the Calvinist psalter tune, is an extremely compact musical structure; that is, much music is condensed into a few notes, and every note is significant. It is simultaneously (a) a melody; (b) a series of chord progressions, with a strong bass line; (c) an example of simple four-part counterpoint; and (d) a rhythmic

pattern that is emphatic, unobtrusive, and easily remembered (for example, “Uxbridge” in Mason, L., 1869, p. 136).

(2) A less formal, more folk-like hymn-tune in which the melody may be enhanced by a second or third voice-part in parallel thirds or sixths, plus a bass that does at least a little more than merely supply the harmonic underpinning of the tune (“Work Song” in Mason, L., 1869, p. 350).

(3) A more advanced version of this second style, using contrasting textures and ranges, with duets, trios, unison passages, brief hints of counterpoint, echoes, build-ups, and so on. Both (2) and (3) may get by on a quite simple harmonic structure, which is compensated for by the naive charm of the one, and the quasi-virtuoso effect of the other (“Sabbath” in Mason, L., 1869, p. 294).

(4) A hymn-tune that combines the solidity of the classic hymn-tune plus a more demanding use of contrapuntal cross references in the make-up of the lower voices; some of these tunes are somewhat canonic, while others weave into the fabric some recurring phrase or motif (“Boxford” in Mason, L., 1850, p. 140).

(5) Hymn-tunes that often have neo-archaic harmonies, giving an unmistakable church-choir effect. They make generous use of repeated notes (and chords) and make little attempt to be “melodic.” The model seems to be Gregorian psalm-tone formulas and Anglican chant (“Fabius” in Mason, L. & Webb, G., 1845, p. 39).

Tunes of types 1 to 4 often are not very different in general effect from comparable tunes from many traditions and eras, whereas tunes of type 5 seem to be a distinctive hallmark of Americans such as Mason. Other than a few examples that made use of fairly conventional harmonies (such as Bradbury’s “Olive’s Brow”), tunes of type 5 are rarely found today. Probably they are too “liturgical” for some, and not “authentic” enough for others. In any event, the classic hymn-tune (type 1 noted above) in time became the norm for congregational singing (with the choir) in the more formal Sunday morning service; while in some austere churches the “standard” came to include much of type 4, the model for which is something approaching



This portrait of Lowell Mason is a copy from a Daguerreotype taken by an unknown photographer about 1850. Credit: Music Library, University of Maryland at College Park.

a Bach chorale harmonization (e.g., “Mannheim” in Glover, 1985, no. 595). The more choir-oriented tunes (types 2 and 3) increasingly became “listening music” for the congregation. Type 2 became the typical “special music” for semi-trained groups in informal Sunday evening services and were used in midweek prayer meetings and other church events. Type 3 tunes continued to serve as Sunday morning choir music until they were eased out by more stylish anthems of the period, by composers such as Dudley Buck, Harry Rowe Shelley, H. P. Danks, P. A. Schneckner, or Caleb Simper. As the worship habits of the people settled into new patterns, some of the old favorite tunes of types 2 and 3 were reworked to make them more practical for congregational singing—sometimes losing part of their attractiveness in the very process of becoming more formal (e.g., altered type 2: “Diligence” in Hutchins, 1894, no. 583, first tune; altered type 3: “Sabbath” in Abbott, L., Morse and Abbott, V., 1893, no. 72). Type 5 tunes virtually faded out of existence.


## Conclusion

To gain a more adequate and realistic un-

derstanding of the character of the hymn-tunes that Mason provided for the churches of his time, reprints of some of his representative collections are needed, as well as a complete edition of his tunes in standard modern notation. But to fully understand the significance of the way his compositions actually functioned in a service of worship—how the hymn-words which the churches mated with Mason's music filled a devotional need in the overall structure of the personal and corporate life of the church-going public—we need an in-depth study of the work of Mason in the total context of the religious institutions of his time and place. Then historians could begin to make informed judgments about the musical and societal values that influenced, and were influenced by, Lowell Mason. We have a long way to go!

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