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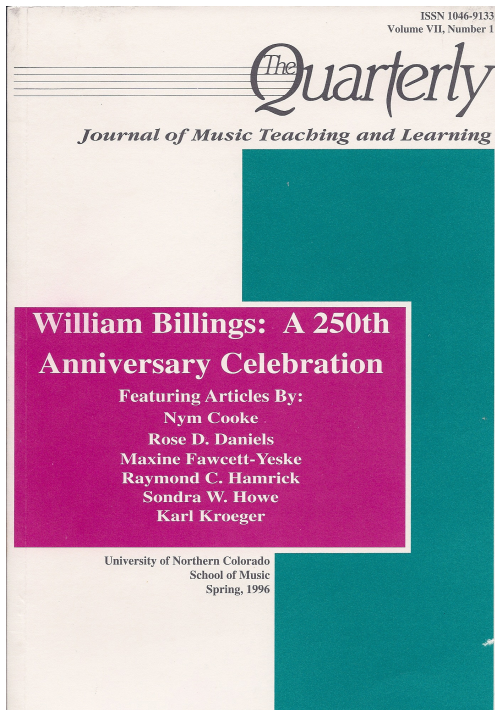
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William Billings At 250: Looking Beyond The American Original Yankee Tunesmith

By Jonathan Bellman
University of Northern Colorado

Had William Billings not existed, to recoin an old saying, it would have been necessary to invent him. He was a son of the American colonies rather than the Old World, and he broke with more musical conventions than he followed. Virtually every aspect of his life and work bespoke a fierce drive and independence that we cannot help associating with our country's own birth-pangs, which, incidentally, he witnessed and actively supported. He is, in fact, the perfect embodiment of the beloved American archetype of Yankee Crank, the inventor who rambles out to his shed after a day's exhausting labor and hammers together some music (or a combine, or a flying-machine). This resilient nonconformity is both attractive and reassuring to us, for as American musicians and educators we are all too aware of our European heritage, a heritage both immeasurably rich and at the same time suffocating. Billings's very singularity makes him an ideally American sort of patron saint.

But ultimately such a two-dimensional image is as bland and limiting as Mason Locke Weems's fantasy of the young George Washington chopping down a cherry tree. Repeating attractive myths about William Billings is, after all, easier than engaging his music, particularly since he was a quirky figure who lived in a time and culture remote from our own, and wrote music far different from that of his much-studied European contemporaries. And so he has, to a large ex-

tent, remained safe in his historical cubby-hole, far better known as a name and the subject of a few colorful anecdotes than really understood as a musical and pedagogical personality. This remains largely the case despite the recent publication of his complete works (under the auspices of the American Musicological Society), an excellent recent recording of a selection of his anthems and fusing-tunes by Paul Hillier and His Majestie's Clerkes, and such scholarly work as the biography by Richard Crawford and David McKay.

The 250th anniversary of his birth offers us at *TQ* the opportunity to address this situation. We therefore sought to assemble a commemorative collection of Billings studies that would explore his work in its own historical context. The biographical overview by Sondra Wieland Howe sets the stage, providing a general picture of the man and his manifold contributions as a basis for the more specific studies that follow. One little-known portion of Billings's story is the way that his music was kept alive by the southern Shape-Note tradition, a manner of singing that could well have preserved a raw, unbuttoned aesthetic close to the composer's own heart, throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (A side-by-side comparison of Billings performances from the aforementioned Paul Hillier recording and from the recording *White Spirituals From the Sacred Harp* — New World Records CD 80205-2 — shows how well these pieces

communicate in both highly nuanced choral versions and in the rawer, more elemental Shape-Note approach.) Raymond Hamrick, who has spent his life singing in this style and studying its traditions and repertory, offers us a Shape-Note Singer's perspective on Billings.

Two more studies address Billings's pedagogy, an area in which he labored tirelessly but which has received surprisingly little attention. Rose Daniels provides a wider context for the singing-school tradition in which Billings worked, and Karl Kroeger presents an in-depth study of one of Billings's publications, *The Singing-Master's Assistant*, with specific attention to its intended use as a teaching tool and what it can tell us about his pedagogical approach. Finally, two articles address Billings's musical style, as a first step in answering Richard Crawford's recent call for study in this area.¹ First,

Maxine Fawcett-Yeske investigates the stylistic evolution of Billings's fugging-tunes. The final article, by Nym Cooke, is a synoptic look at Billings in his time: his musical style, his prose style, the circumstances of his life, and, ultimately, the extent to which he may justly be regarded as "typical."

It is our hope that with these studies we can move Billings beyond the usual clichés, and bring the musical and educational creativity and vision of this Founding Father into clearer focus. Let us hoist a Boston brew, then, wish him a happy birthday, and drink to the musical discoveries of the next 250 years!

Notes

1. Richard Crawford, *The American Musical Landscape* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 111-12.



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