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### William Billing's The Singing Master's Assistant As a Pedagogical Aid for Singing Schools

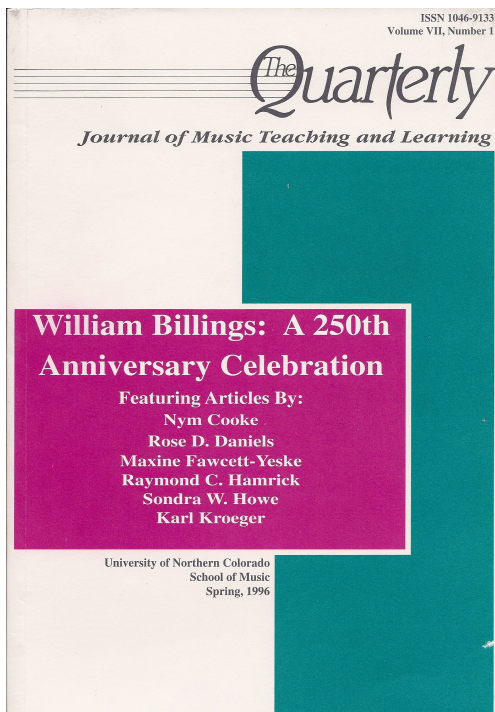
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# William Billings's *The Singing Master's Assistant* As A Pedagogical Aid For Singing Schools

By Karl Kroeger

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Between the years 1778 and 1781, William Billings published three collections of his music, each aimed at a different clientele. For the congregational singer in public worship, Billings issued *Music in Miniature* (Boston, 1779), a collection of plain and extended tunes, mostly his own, without text, but adapted to the common meters of Anglo-American psalmody. The book's small, upright format allowed it to be bound with metrical psalters and hymnals. For the accomplished singer, Billings brought out *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (Boston, 1781), which was "Part of the Book of Anthems, which [he had] so long promised."<sup>1</sup> It contained some of Billings's most imaginative and challenging compositions. Preceding both of these, however, Billings published *The Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston, 1778), which he characterized as "an

abridgement from the New-England Psalm-Singer,"<sup>2</sup> his first tunebook, issued in 1770. *The Singing Master's Assistant*, as its title declares, was intended as an instruction book for the singing school.

[Billings] observes that it is "not who shall sing *loudest*; but who shall sing *best*" that receives praise.

Although he was apprenticed to and worked as a tanner in his early life, by the 1770s Billings apparently spent much of his time, and seems to have earned a good deal of his livelihood, teaching singing schools. He must have been a successful teacher, for he was in wide demand in the Boston area for musical instruction to choirs and musical societies. Thus, it was natural that his first concern when publishing collections of his music was

to issue one that would assist him in his primary occupation: teacher of choral singing. Since *The Singing Master's Assistant* (hereafter *SMA*) was intended as a teaching aid, it will be informative to examine it from a pedagogical viewpoint to see how its contents and arrangement made it particularly suited for this purpose.

Singing schools were ubiquitous throughout much of eastern Massachusetts during the final quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Usually sponsored, or at least sanctioned, by

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a church, singing schools often met several evenings a week for instruction in the rudiments of music reading and to learn a basic repertory of psalm tunes for use in public worship. The intention of the sponsors was that the students of the school join the church choir after instruction to support the musical side of Sunday services. In many places, singing schools were held between late fall and early spring to accommodate agricultural schedules, but in larger towns like Boston, they were probably also held during other times of the year. Thus, there was likely to have been plenty of work for Billings: he was the only singing master in Boston at the time, and there was apparently a need for his services.

Nathaniel Duren Gould, a singing master from later in the psalmody era, presents a first-hand if somewhat deprecating view of the singing school in his *A History of Church Music in America*.<sup>4</sup> Although Gould accents the negatives regarding its organization, instruction, and accomplishments, he nonetheless presents a reasonably comprehensive account of what went on in the typical singing school of the late eighteenth century. Gould describes a type of school for which the initiative came from the local church leaders, who felt that music in public worship was slipping toward the unacceptable. They then set about finding sponsors, who pledged a certain amount toward the school's expenses. The major expense was, of course, the singing master's fee, but room rental, wood for heat, and candles for light were also needs that drew on the available funds. In this case, the school was probably free to the scholars, but they were expected to join the choir after instruction.

In another scenario, the singing masters were themselves often the driving forces behind establishing singing schools. Arriving in a town, a singing master would usually se-

cure the approval of the local minister and town leaders, advertise his singing school in the local newspaper or by means of handbills, and hold the school if enough scholars could be attracted.<sup>5</sup> The scholars themselves paid for the instruction, wholly defraying any costs. Usually, about thirty scholars, paying perhaps as little as \$1.50 for a quarter's instruction, two classes per week, were sufficient to start a school. The singing master might have several schools going in neighboring towns, serving one on Mondays and Thursdays, another on Tuesdays and Fridays, and perhaps a third on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Schools usually began at five or six in the evening and ran to eight or nine o'clock.

As an experienced singing master, Billings knew the value of discipline in the teaching process. In the preface of *SMA*, in a section entitled "Observe these Rules for regulating a Singing-School" he wrote:

As the well being of every society depends in a great measure upon GOOD ORDER, I here present you with some general rules, to be observed in a Singing-School.

1st. Let the society be first formed, and the articles signed by every individual; and all those who are under age, should apply to their parents, masters or guardians to sign for them: the house should be provided, and every[thing] necessary for the school should be procured, before the arrival of the Master, to prevent his being unnecessarily detained.

2d. The Members should be very punctual in attending at a certain hour, or minute, as the master shall direct, under the penalty of a small fine, and if the master should be delinquent, his fine to be double the sum laid upon the scholars — Said fines to be appropriated to the use of the school, in procuring wood, candles, &c. N.B. The fines to be collected by the Clerk, so chosen for that purpose.

3d. All the scholars should submit to the judgment of the master respecting the part they are to sing; and if he should think fit to remove them from one part to another, they



are not to contradict, or cross him in his judgment; but they would do well to suppose it is to answer some special purpose; because it is morally impossible for him to proportion the parts properly, until he has made himself acquainted with the strength and fitness of the pupil's voices.

4th. No unnecessary conversation, whispering, or laughing, to be practiced; for it is not only indecent, but very impolitic; it being a needless expense of time, and instead of acquiring to themselves respect, they render themselves ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of all serious people; and above all, I enjoin it upon you to refrain from all levity, both in conduct and conversation, while singing sacred words; ... and remember that in so doing, you not only dishonor God and sin against your own souls, but you give occasion, and very just ground to the adversaries or enemies of music, to speak reproachfully.<sup>6</sup>

The four rules that Billings proposed are basic to all situations where good instruction is desired: common agreement to support the teaching, punctual attendance (enforced here by monetary penalty), recognition of the authority of the teacher, and good discipline and order among the students. The warning against blasphemy in the fourth rule added the authority of the church to control youthful conduct and exuberant spirits. How closely these rules were followed by other singing masters may be questioned, but undoubtedly they were a foundation upon which Billings built his own teaching.

*SMA* begins, as did most tunebooks of the day, with an exposition of the rudiments of musical notation. Billings's presentation of the fundamentals of music reading does not differ significantly from earlier singing school instruction books. Three collections used earlier in Boston provide a view of singing school instruction in the decades prior to *SMA*. Thomas Walter's venerable *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained*, first published in 1721 and still in print after 1764, gives "Some brief and very plain Instructions for Singing by NOTE."<sup>7</sup> Its eighteen separate sections cover the seven distinct sounds of the diatonic scale, the "fasola" (as the current solfege system was called — see sidebar) names of the notes, the rules for finding "mi," the unique syllable from which the other fasola syllables could be gauged, an explana-

tion of the gamut, clefs employed in the various parts, sharps and flats, major and minor keys, the length and appearance of the various notes, supplementary musical signs, and concords and discords. The discourse occupies some twenty-five pages of closely printed and densely reasoned prose that often reads like the sermons and theological tracts issued in that day. This is not surprising, since its author, one of the leaders of the "Singing by Rule" movement in the 1720s, was also a clergyman.<sup>8</sup>

In 1764, Daniel Bayley, a singing master in nearby Newburyport, Massachusetts, took Walter's book, added some material adapted from British psalmodist William Tans'ur's *The Royal Melody Compleat* (London, 1755) and some new tunes, and issued *A New and Compleat Introduction to the Grounds and Rules of Musick*.<sup>9</sup> Bayley reduced Walter's eighteen sections to nine and added a condensation of Tans'ur's rudiments, covering much the same material as Walter's, as "Book II." The great advantage of the Tans'ur/Bayley rudiments is their clarity and simplicity. The presentation is straightforward, without the burden of antique and elegant language that cloys much of Walter's theoretical introduction. Perhaps Bayley thought it necessary to keep Walter's rudiments, even in abridged and simplified form, as a bow to tradition, for Walter's tunebook held sway in Boston for over forty years.

In 1767, Bayley issued an altered reprint of Tans'ur's tunebook, and two years later he combined it with Aaron Williams's *The Universal Psalmodist* (London, 1762), retitling the combination *The American Harmony*. *The American Harmony* went through eight editions to 1774, each essentially the same text and music.<sup>10</sup> The rudiments section of *American Harmony* is divided into six chapters, covering the gamut and clefs, the names and measures of notes and rests, other characters in music, tuning the voice and graces used in music, time signatures and how to beat time, keys in music and their transposition, and concords and discords. Except for the final topic — concords and discords — these are essentially the same as presented in Book II of Bayley's *A New and Compleat Introduction*. Billings probably knew both of

### FASOLA NOTATION

The “fasola” system used by Billings had long been in use in both England and the American colonies, and was an abbreviated form of the solmized “gamut” of the middle ages. According to this system, the notes *fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa* were assigned to the tones of the rising major scale. *Mi* therefore corresponded to the leading tone, and since there was only one *mi* while the other syllables were used twice, *mi* was the only syllable that could define a specific line or space as a particular syllable location. *Fa, sol, la* would then be placed a half step above *mi*, and a repeat of those syllables placed a half step above the first *la*.

The fasola system did not require the use of key signatures. In fact, the first edition of the first tunebook to use shape note notation (a fasola-based system intended for those unable to read standard musical notation) *The Easy Instructor* (Philadelphia, 1801), did not use key signatures at all. If, for example, *mi* had been located by the composer on the D line, it would not have mattered if the key signature was three flats or four sharps; the space above would still have been *fa*, and the line above that would still have been *sol*, etc. Key signatures, when they appeared, were conveniences for readers of conventional notation. They were not needed by the singer so long as the music was sung unaccompanied. Of course, when instruments were added, then the key signature was important; for the singer in the fasola system, however, it was irrelevant.

Bayley's tunebooks as well as Walter's, and may have even used them prior to the publication of his own *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (Boston, 1770). They certainly had an

influence on Billings's own presentation of musical rudiments.

Billings obviously expected *SMA* to be used by other singing masters, for he addressed the introduction, not to the scholars in his singing schools, but “To the several Teachers of Music, in this, and the adjacent States.” He advised them that he had

drawn up the rules of Practical Music, as concise as the nature of the thing would admit, and ha[d] inserted them in course, *as they should be taught*; I recommend it to you to teach after the manner they are inserted; it being the best method I have yet found, from long experience [emphasis added].<sup>11</sup>

By the time *SMA* was published Billings had been a singing master for at least a decade, teaching singing schools not only throughout the Boston area but also as far south as Providence, Rhode Island. He was widely known for his teaching, and his tunebook introduction appears to be a model of his pedagogical method.

The rudiments of music in *SMA* are organized into fourteen “Lessons,” each covering a well-defined and distinct facet of musical information. The lessons progress from the most basic knowledge necessary for reading music to elements of musical aesthetics: from the practical to the philosophical. Lesson I cov-

ers the gamut or musical scale, including both the letter and fasola names for the notes. This seems the logical place to start the beginner, and Billings, like most other

The four rules that Billings proposed are basic to all situations where good instruction is desired: common agreement to support the teaching, punctual attendance (enforced here by monetary penalty), recognition of the authority of the teacher, and good discipline and order among the students.

singing masters of his day, recognized this as fundamental. Lesson II is devoted to transposition and how to find “mi,” the “master note,” in various keys. This was extremely important, for until the singer located “mi,” the other fasola syllables could not be used. When the music was without key signature, “mi” was always on B, and the syllables above were fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la. But music often had key signatures of one to several sharps or flats, and unless the singer could locate “mi” in other keys, reading music by note and syllable was impossible.

Lesson III is devoted to the various clefs used in psalmody and their relation to one another. Again, to be able to locate a pitch on the five-line staff is fundamental to music reading, and the ability to read the clef is essential. Two lessons (IV and V) are devoted to musical characters, the former to the shape and value of notes and rests, the latter to other characters, such as the sharp, flat, repeat sign, slur, trill, etc. Lesson VI presents the nine “Moods of Time,” the system for determining not only the meter, but also, to a degree, the tempo of the music. Each mood carried an implied tactus that told the singer how fast the music should go. The moods of time were very important for the student to understand, and Billings spent more space (and therefore probably also time) on them than any other section in the theoretical introduction.

Lesson VII deals rather extensively with syncopation, giving seven examples of various types of syncopation and degrees of complexity. Billings obviously felt this to be important, noting that it is a subject that has “not been sufficiently explained by any writers I have met with.”<sup>12</sup> However, Billings’s

emphasis on syncopation seems paradoxical, because very few syncopations are found in psalmody, either in Billings’s own music or that of other composers, and none of the variety and complexity that Billings postulates. Perhaps this was a personal enthusiasm that he carried over into his teaching, but it seems to have had little immediate application.

Lesson VIII presents the “Grace of Transition,” a quick and graceful sliding between pitches a third apart, intended “to sweeten the roughness of a leap.”<sup>13</sup> This widely recommended ornament was apparently taught as part of the singer’s vocal equipment. Lesson IX covers concords and discords in music: not strictly necessary for singers to understand, but essential to anyone who wanted to try his hand at composing. Lesson X presents the keys of music; Lesson XI deals with slurs and their musical effect. Lesson XII considers pronunciation of the text, apparently a continuing difficulty for many singing masters. New England regional accents were strong and varied, and students often pronounced words quite differently from the standard, educated enunciation of the day.

The final two lessons (XIII and XIV) present miscellaneous thoughts on singing that could not be fitted into other sections. In these lessons, Billings characterizes the timbral qualities of the voices, advises on choral balance, admonishes young singers not “to invade the province of another, by singing a Solo, which does not belong to your part,” and observes that it is “not who shall sing *loudest*, but who shall sing *best*” that receives praise.<sup>14</sup>

Gould noted that the first activity in the

singing school was “trying the voice,” whereby the teacher tested each scholar’s ability to imitate a given sound.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, it was necessary for the teacher to assess the students’ ability to hear and reproduce sounds. No real singing could begin until the students could control the pitch, range, and intensity of their voices. This gave him some idea of the range, quality, and character of the voices and suggested how the school might progress. This “trying the voice,” according to Gould, often occupied the first session of the singing school, particularly if the school was large.

In addition to the explication of musical rudiments, Billings’s introductory material includes an extensive Musical Dictionary, defining words and concepts unknown to the students. Many of the entries ring with Billings’s own prose style, although some may have come from Tans’ur, either directly or through Bayley’s reprints. Most have a direct application to the musical rudiments, although some do not and may have been included out of whimsy or to impress the reader with Billings’s erudition. An example of the former may be

SERANADE [sic]. Night-music played, or sung at the door, or window. N.B. This sort of nocturnal Music is not so much in vogue with us Americans, as it is in Europe, where the young gallants frequently entertain their mistresses in amorous ditties.<sup>16</sup>

An example of the latter is almost surely ETYMOLOGY. The first derivation from whence a word, or sound is taken.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, and quite unlike tunebooks before and after *SMA* which tend to deal solemnly with the topic, Billings includes several humorous attachments to his theoretical introduction.<sup>18</sup> Among these are his self-deprecating introductory remarks, in which he chides himself for “commencing author” before he was ready, and his earlier tunebook for being “never worthy my printing, or your inspection.”<sup>19</sup> His fanciful address “To the Goddess of Discord,” is accompanied at the end of the book by his notoriously dissonant tune JARGON.<sup>20</sup> His enthusiastic “Encomium on Music” celebrates the various wondrous effects that music has produced in the past, including a cure for

the bite of the tarantula spider.<sup>21</sup> The fourth edition of *SMA*, published between 1786 and 1789, includes “A Musical Creed; In Imitation of St. Athanasius,”<sup>22</sup> a parody of The Creed of St. Athanasius from *The Heidelbergh Catechism*. These humorous diversions were obviously added to entertain the users of *SMA*, who may have felt daunted by the sometimes dense explanations that necessarily accompany something as initially foreign as learning the rudiments of music. Billings seems to be saying: “See, learning music can be fun too!”

The students were to memorize the rudiments as part of their musical knowledge. To assist in this, some later tunebooks and teaching manuals presented the rudiments in question and answer format.<sup>23</sup> Most, however, follow Billings’s manner, presenting the material in discrete segments, often but not always in the same order that Billings recommended. Precisely how Billings taught the rudiments is unknown, but one can certainly imagine that he lectured, demonstrated with his “stentorian” voice,<sup>24</sup> and asked numerous questions of the students in each of the Lessons. Billings noted that “you [the teacher] must read lectures upon every lesson, and they [the students] must read them until they remember the substance without a book, so far as to recite each lesson.”<sup>25</sup>

When the rudiments were learned and each singer had a firm grasp of what the signs meant, the scholars, according to Gould, “were then allowed to proceed *together* in what was called rising and falling the eight notes of the octave, and were taught the names and comparative lengths of the notes.”<sup>26</sup> Most tunebooks of the day included G-major scale rising and falling in half-notes to give students the sound of the major scale. *SMA* does not have such a scale, but Billings could have used a visual aid in class to present this part. It also seems likely that Billings had some singing with each lesson, for he counsels that “although these lessons must be well understood by the scholars; yet I do not insist upon their being kept from sounding [i.e., singing] until they have thoroughly attained them.”<sup>27</sup>

Following the sounding of the eight notes

up and down, the students were ready to learn their first tunes. Gould says that there was often considerable pressure applied to the singing master by students, parents, and sponsors to learn tunes quickly, even before the rudiments were memorized.<sup>28</sup> This was sometimes done by rote teaching, which may have hindered the students' overall progress.<sup>29</sup> Schools were also often attended by choir members who were already fairly accomplished singers. They would usually come later in the evening, after the rudiments for that session had been covered, to join in the singing. In some cases, this could be a boon for the singing master, but in many instances these singers were a distraction, since the young singers were often intimidated by the more experienced choristers.

By the end of the quarter, most young scholars probably had made good strides toward mastering the rudiments, had learned the sound of the scale, and acquired some pieces to take with them into the church choir. As a graduation exercise, the singing school often presented a "singing lecture"—a public concert at which their newly gained skills could be exhibited, judged, and applauded.<sup>30</sup> The singing lecture usually included an address, often by the local minister, extolling the virtues of good sacred singing and exhorting the school members to exert themselves further to perfect their newly acquired skills. At the concert, various tunes, set pieces, and anthems were sung, demonstrating the students' prowess and the ability of the singing master to whip them into performance shape in a comparatively short time.

The rudiments of *SMA* were, of course, intended for musical instruction, but the collection of tunes that accompany them was apparently designed to serve broader purposes. Billings obviously intended that they appeal to a wide range of musical interests and abilities—to the singing school student, the members of the church choir, and the accomplished singers in a musical society. Many of the pieces in *SMA* are technically and musically demanding; in particular, the anthems toward the end of the book require not only a solid technique, but also some musical sophistication to bring them off. At

the beginning of the book, however, a group of tunes appears that seem specifically designed to exemplify the musical rudiments, as well as provide the singing school student with a basic repertory of pieces for use in the church choir. Many of these pieces are among Billings's most popular works: AMHERST, BROOKFIELD, CHESTER, AFRICA, BOSTON, SUFFOLK, and LEBANON. Table I offers a conspectus of the first thirty-one pieces in *SMA* with some of their musical characteristics.

Twenty-one of these tunes occupy a unique position in the tunebook: they are pieces which were reprinted from *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (hereafter *NEPS*). Each piece was not only brought over from Billings's prior tunebook, but also revised from the earlier setting, sometimes extensively.<sup>31</sup> In *NEPS*, these pieces were spread widely throughout the tunebook, ranging from page 8 to page 108; in *SMA*, however, they are all grouped within the first twenty-one pages. Moreover, this selection of pieces, along with the ten newly published tunes that accompany them, offers examples of nearly all the elements discussed in the theoretical introduction. One may suggest that these were the tunes used by Billings in his singing schools to exemplify points he raised in his lectures. Let us examine these works to see how they met the needs of the teacher and the students.

To illustrate the moods of time, the selection covers each of the nine moods with at least one piece, except for the second mood.<sup>32</sup> The most common moods, 3/2 and 2/2, are represented by thirteen and ten tunes respectively. Several (JUDEA, DORCHESTER, and EMMAUS) feature change of mood within the course of the tune, a refinement that singers did not often encounter outside the anthem or set piece. Not only are the moods of time well illustrated, but rhythmic movement within the moods is varied as well. For example, in first mood, triple time (3/2), one encounters slow movement entirely in whole and half notes in NEW SOUTH, motion in half notes in HOLLIS STREET, mixed whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes in PRINCETOWN and AF-



**Table 1: Tunes in the first part of SMA**

| Tunename      | SMA<br>page | NEPS<br>page | Meter   | Type | Key | Alterations   |             |                  |
|---------------|-------------|--------------|---------|------|-----|---|-------------|------------------|
|               |             |              |         |      |     | <u>Tune</u>   | <u>Bass</u> | <u>Other Pts</u> |
| AURORA        | 1           | n/i          | 3/2     | F    | C   |   |             |                  |
| BOSTON        | 2           | 23           | 2/2     | X    | Bb  | same  | sim         | sim              |
| DUXBOROUGH    | 3           | 8            | C       | P    | G   | same  | x/cns       | sim              |
| SAVANNAH      | 3           | n/i          | 2/2     | A    | Cm  |   |             |                  |
| AFRICA        | 4           | 14           | 3/2     | P    | Eb  | same  | same        | sim              |
| BROOKFIELD    | 4           | 7            | 3/2     | P    | Dm  | same  | same        | sim              |
| AMERICA       | 5           | 7            | 3/2     | P    | D   | sim   | same        | sim              |
| JUDEA         | 6           | n/i          | 6/4,6/8 | X    | F   |   |             |                  |
| AMHERST       | 7           | 48           | 2/2     | X    | G   | metric alteration (NEPS is 3/2)   |             |                  |
| BRUNSWICK     | 8           | n/i          | 2/2     | X    | F#m |   |             |                  |
| DORCHESTER    | 9           | 78           | 3/2,2/2 | P    | F#m | sim   | x/cns       | sim              |
| SULLIVAN      | 9           | n/i          | 3/2     | P    | D   |   |             |                  |
| NEW SOUTH     | 10          | 12           | 3/2     | P    | C   | sim   | sim         | sim              |
| MEDFIELD      | 10          | 94           | 3/8     | P    | C   | same  | x/cns       | sim              |
| HEATH         | 11          | n/i          | 2/2     | F    | C   |   |             |                  |
| CHESTER       | 12          | 91           | 2/2     | P    | F   | same  | x/cns       | sim              |
| CAMBRIDGE     | 13          | 47           | 2/2     | P    | C   | same  | x/cns       | x/cns            |
| LEBANON       | 14          | 95           | 2/2     | P    | Am  | metric alteration (NEPS is $\text{♩}$ );<br>note values doubled in SMA; transposed from Gm to Am. |             |                  |
| MARBLEHEAD    | 14          | 71           | 3/2     | P    | G   | same  | sim         | sim              |
| NEW HINGHAM   | 15          | 59           | 2/2     | P    | Am  | NEPS in Bm, 3d phrase altered   |             |                  |
| MARSHFIELD    | 15          | 76           | 3/2     | P    | Em  | sim   | x/cns       | sim              |
| HEBRON        | 16          | 69           | 3/2     | P    | Dm  | same  | sim         | sim              |
| HOLLIS STREET | 16          | 94           | 3/2     | P    | F   | same  | sim         | sim              |
| PRINCETOWN    | 17          | 45           | 3/2     | P    | Dm  | same  | x/cns       | sim              |
| SUFFOLK       | 17          | 17           | 3/2     | P    | Gm  | same  | x/cns       | sim              |
| MEDWAY        | 18          | n/i          | 3/4     | F    | G   |   |             |                  |
| CONSOLATION   | 19          | n/i          | 6/8     | P    | Eb  |   |             |                  |
| WALTHAM       | 20          | 95           | 3/2     | P    | C   | sim   | x/cns       | sim              |
| EMMAUS        | 20          | n/i          | 3/2,2/2 | P    | Gm  |   |             |                  |
| SAPPHO        | 21          | 108          | 2/2     | AX   | C   | setting revised and truncated   |             |                  |
| DAVID'S       |             |              |         |      |     |   |             |                  |
| LAMENTATION   | 22          | n/i          | 2/4     | S    | Am  |   |             |                  |

## Legend:

n/i = not included  
 F = fugal tune  
 X = extended tune  
 P = plain tune  
 A = antiphonal tune  
 AX = antiphonal extended tune  
 S = set piece of anthem  
 m = minor

same = same melodic/rhythmic details  
 sim = similar melody but melodic/  
       rhythmic details differ  
 x/cns = same melody except choosing  
       notes omitted



RICA, and the lilting dotted quarter, eighth, and half note patterns of BROOKFIELD, MARBLEHEAD, and MARSHFIELD.

The third mood, common time (marked by the reversed C in the tunebooks, but represented here by the time 2/2 signature) has a similar variety. DUXBOROUGH, the third piece in the book, gives a simple half note movement in all voices, while AMHERST, CAMBRIDGE, CHESTER, and LEBANON present more complex rhythmic arrangements of the basic beat pattern.

All common key signatures are covered between three flats and three sharps, both major and minor modes, except for A major and B minor.<sup>33</sup> In psalmody, according to the fasola system of solfege, three moves of “mi” by sharps and three by flats covered the seven pitch letter names, and any further movement away would only duplicate the pitch name of another transposition.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is rare for a piece to have more than three sharps or flats, since psalmodists usually preferred to use the key signature with fewer accidentals.

The various common musical forms are also well covered in this initial group of pieces. They include three futing tunes (although few novice singers probably could get far with them, they are so demanding), four extended tunes, twenty-one plain tunes, one antiphonal tune, one antiphonal extended tune, and one brief anthem.<sup>35</sup> Except for the futing tunes and several of the extended tunes, these pieces seem well within the capacities of beginning singing school students, if a solid technical foundation had been laid by the singing master.

In addition to the meters, keys, and forms, certain special symbols and techniques are exemplified. For example, triplets are found in several works, including SAVANNAH, AMERICA, and EMMAUS. Long, expressive melismatic passages, generally rare in tunes but more common in anthems, are found in BRUNSWICK and MEDWAY. The Mark of Distinction, a wedge-shaped sign to be performed as an accent, is seen in HEATH. No trills are found in the initial group of pieces, but the trill is rather rare in Billings's music generally; its absence is not unexpected. A number of works in the group use the repeat

sign, including most of the extended tunes. Thus Billings was able to employ the first thirty-one pieces to illustrate most of the elements of musical notation in the theoretical introduction.

One can picture Billings, the ebullient and enthusiastic singing master, before his class of young scholars leading them with voice and gesture through the mysterious domain of musical notation. With humor and the force of his personality, he pushes them to accomplish more in the twelve-week session than they had even dreamed they could achieve. Starting perhaps with a canon, to get them used to sustaining individual parts in a contrapuntal texture,<sup>36</sup> he soon progresses to a simple, note-against-note tune, like DUXBOROUGH, NEW SOUTH, or PRINCETOWN. Perhaps initially the students sang this piece in two parts, melody and bass, for Billings stated that “it is a maxim with me, that two parts sung well, are better than four parts indifferently sung.”<sup>37</sup> Following this, the students were probably ready to tackle something a bit more challenging: perhaps AMHERST, LEBANON, or CAMBRIDGE. Next, they might move on to BROOKFIELD, AFRICA, MARBLEHEAD, or SUFFOLK. At this point, having gone progressively to more demanding music, they might continue with pieces in different meters, such as CONSO-LATION (6/8), MEDWAY (3/4), JUDEA (6/4 and 6/8), or DAVID'S LAMENTATION (2/4). It seems likely this progress would be followed by the learning of a futing tune, perhaps AURORA, whose fuge seems the least demanding in the book.

This scenario is speculative, of course, a suggestion of how the pieces might be taught to support the theoretical instruction as well as gain a repertory for use outside the singing school. We do not know how Billings would have approached the teaching of the music. One can feel fairly certain, however, based on the organization of the theoretical introduction, that it would have been in a progressive manner, careful to bring along the students step by step.

Billings's reputation as a singing master was based on a solid record of accomplishment. He was able, during the 1770s and

early 1780s, to engender enthusiasm in singers, to teach widely and successfully, and, as a result, to place himself in comfortable financial circumstances.<sup>38</sup> Toward the end of the decade, Billings's fortunes declined as he faced more competition in a limited market and perhaps declining health. His last years were spent in the severe financial straits, but his love of music and his reputation as Boston's premiere singing master and composer never waned. His obituary in the *Columbian Centinel* called him "the celebrated music composer,"<sup>39</sup> and the diarist, Rev. William Bentley, noting that Billings "spake & sung & thought as a man above the common abilities," called him "the father of our New England music."<sup>40</sup>

*SMA* was Billings's only tunebook to appear in more than one edition. It was designed to be both a singing school textbook and a collection of Billings's pieces for use on many occasions: religious, patriotic, public concerts, private entertainment, and more. It succeeded remarkably well. An intimation of *SMA*'s popularity is offered by McKay and Crawford:

It is difficult to find well preserved copies [of *SMA*]. Early American tunebooks survive in varying degrees of decay, and certain titles show some consistency in this matter. Some, for example Andrew Law's *Art of Singing*, fourth edition, are normally in near-mint condition, their original bindings intact, their pages unfrayed, their paper unsoiled. At the other extreme are those that are seldom complete, whose bindings are broken, and whose pages are foxed and dogeared, bearing the earmarks of continuous and prolonged use. ...By this measure, the *Singing Master's Assistant* must have been a popular item indeed, for most surviving copies display signs of heavy wear.<sup>41</sup>

*SMA* also became a major source for many later tunebook compilers. Its theoretical introduction was borrowed from extensively and its collection of tunes was regularly pilaged for Billings's most popular pieces.<sup>42</sup> Although some later compilers produced better organized presentations of the rudiments of music and collections of tunes that moved in a more progressive manner, none had the lasting impact, both intellectual and musical, that *SMA* had. It richly deserved its nickname: "Billings's Best."

## Notes

1. William Billings, *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (Boston, 1781), 2.
2. William Billings, *The Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston, 1778), title page.
3. For a basic study of the singing school, see Alan C. Buechner, *Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1760-1800*. Ed.D. diss., Harvard University, 1960.
4. Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 76-100. Gould (1781-1864) began teaching singing schools in 1799 and continued until 1843. He estimates that he taught at least 50,000 students during this time. While his opinion of the music and teaching methodology during his first decade as a singing master is often deprecating, his observations seem nonetheless accurate and valid.
5. See Henry M. Brooks, *Olden-Time Music* (Boston: Tichnor, 1888), 109-116 for a group of advertisements that appeared in the Salem, Massachusetts, newspapers. Most advertise holding the school two evenings a week for one quarter for a fee of from \$1.50 to \$3.00 per student.
6. *SMA*, from *The Complete Works of William Billings*, 4 vols. (Boston: The American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-90), II, 22. (Hereafter cited as *WB* II, v.4 will be cited as *WB* IV).
7. Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* (Boston: Thomas Johnston, 1764), 1-25.
8. Nym Cooke, "Walter, Thomas," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, IV, 474.
9. Daniel Bayley, *A New and Compleat Introduction to the Grounds and Rules of Musick* (Boston: Thomas Johnston, 1766), [5]-24. This edition is not significantly different from earlier ones.
10. The 8th edition, dated 1773, is the tunebook described here. The bibliographic history of Bayley's tunebooks is complex. For a survey, see Allen P. Britton, Irving Lowens, and Richard Crawford, *American Sacred Music Imprints, 1698-1810: A Bibliography* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1990), 116-134.

11. WB II, 7.
12. WB II, 12-13.
13. WB II, 15.
14. WB II, 19.
15. Gould, 86-87.
16. WB II, 28.
17. WB II, 26.
18. Billings refers to "A MUSICAL CREED" in *SMA*, 4th ed., as a "burlesque." He doubtless thought of his other humorous pieces in the earlier editions in the same vein.
19. WB II, 6.
20. WB II, 29-31; JARGON appears in WB II on 263.
21. WB II, 31-32.
22. WB II, 33-34.
23. For example, Daniel Read's *An Introduction to Psalmody* (New Haven, 1790) employs this format.
24. Gould, 46, quoting Dr. John Pierce, of Brookline, Massachusetts, who had frequently sung with Billings.
25. WB II, 19.
26. Gould, 93.
27. WB II, 19.
28. Gould, 96.
29. Gould, 86.
30. Gould, 101. A number of these lectures were published during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They seem to follow a general formula, whereby the orator, usually a local clergyman, traces the biblical history of music, noting that sacred music was ordained of God and practiced by the church fathers back to Adam. They then usually commend the achievements of the scholars and compliment the singing master, ending with an encouragement to continue this excellent work. Occasionally, particularly during the 1800-1820 period, they are reform tracts which denigrate the currently popular American church music and advocate a return to pre-Revolutionary War psalmody, which they considered more solemn and chaste.
31. In Table I, under the heading "Alterations," indications of the changes Billings made in the pieces from *New England Psalm Singer* are presented. In most cases, few changes were made in the tune itself. The bass was also seldom altered, except for the

elimination of choosing notes (two- and three-note chords in the vocal part). The most consistent alterations are to the treble and counter, but even there the changes tend to be more cosmetic than substantive: passing tones added, occasional altered pitches, &c. Only AMHERST, LEBANON, NEW HINGHAM, and SAPPHO underwent extensive changes.

32. The second mood, symbolized by the character  $\text{♩}$ , representing 4/4 time with a moderate pulse, was one of the rarer moods of time. Only 3/8, the third mood of triple time, was used less often by psalmodists.

33. B minor is one of the rarer keys in psalmody, although Billings used it several times in *NEPS*. The omission of A major from the group is less easily explainable, for its use by psalmodists was much more common. However, there are two examples of F# minor, which may serve as a substitute when discussing key signatures.

34. In *The Continental Harmony* (Boston, 1794) Billings wrote: "There are six removes of B mi, which, together with B mi natural, take up the seven letters; for if you add another flat, or sharp, it will only be going over the same again (p.xiii, WB IV, 17).

35. Fuging tunes are strophic pieces that include at least one phrase where the voices enter individually, causing the words to be sung at different times by the voices. Plain tunes are simple strophic settings of one stanza of text with no attempt to elaborate the text setting by musical means. Extended tunes use various methods, such as word repetition, melisma, or setting multiple stanzas of text, to enlarge the scope of the musical setting. Antiphonal tunes are plain tunes that include at least one phrase set for fewer voices than the full ensemble. Antiphonal extended tunes have characteristics of an extended tune with at least one phrase set for fewer voices. An anthem is usually a through composed setting of a prose text.

36. There are no canons published in *Singing-Master's Assistant*, but several were printed in *NEPS* and could easily have been taught by rote.

37. WB II, 18.

38. In 1780, he was affluent enough to

purchase a house in Boston for £6000. Nathan suggests that the high cost was largely due to wartime inflation. See Hans Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), 31.

39. Nathan, 46.

40. William Bentley, *Diary*, as quote in David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *Will-*

*iam Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 186-87.

41. McKay and Crawford, 78-9.

42. McKay and Crawford note that "approximately 62 percent or some five-eighths of the compositions in the *Singing Master's Assistant* were borrowed by later compilers." (Ibid., 78).



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