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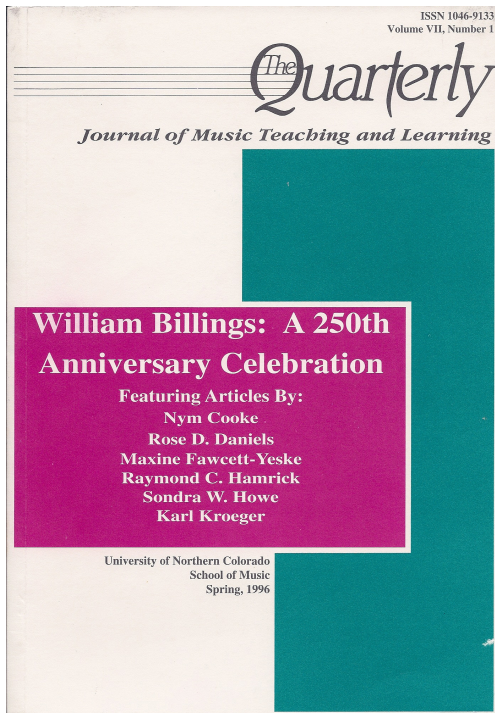
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William Billings: Representative American Psalmodist?

By Nym Cooke
College of the Holy Cross

The Bicentennial of American independence sent scholars and musicians scurrying to find 18th-century composers whose music, lives, or personalities (preferably all three) gave expression to the Revolutionary struggle and the new nation's promise. These searchers found all they needed in William Billings. If a committee of the savviest television writers in New York had worked overtime to create a human symbol of young America who was also a composer, their fiction could not have touched Billings the fact. Billings, the humble tanner who was friends with patriot leader Sam Adams; Billings, blind of one eye and lame of one leg; Billings, who cleaned streets and corralled hogs for the city of Boston yet who "spake & sung & thought as a man above the common abilities," in the words of an illus-

If a committee of the savviest television writers in New York had worked overtime to create a human symbol of young America who was also a composer, their fiction could not have touched Billings the fact.

trious contemporary;¹ Billings, the composer-writer whose prose rivals his music in its charm; Billings, whose all-original tunebook *The New-*

England Psalm-Singer (1770), with its frontispiece engraved by Paul Revere, represents a true musical Declaration of Independence in the year of the Boston Massacre. Billings was too good to be true — yet he *was* true.

The rediscovery of Billings, given scholarly substance by the publication of two fine biographical studies in 1975 and 1976,² launched an impressive edition of his complete works, sponsored by the American Musicological Society.³ This in turn has increased the presence of Billings's compositions in church services and concerts, and has led to a splendid all-Billings recording by His Majesty's Clerkes under the direction

of Paul Hillier, titled *A Land of Pure Delight*.⁴ Though his voice-leading may still seem awkward and his harmony monotonous to ears accustomed to Orlando di Lasso or George Frideric Handel, it seems clear that William Billings has been accepted by the musical and musicological establishment. Along the way, quite understandably, he has become a kind of spokesman for some 300

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individuals who composed or compiled sacred music ("psalmody") in this country before 1811.

These 300 composers and compilers are one indication of early American psalmody's extent. There are other indications. Before the tide of fashion turned sharply away from homegrown musical compositions at the end of the 19th century's first decade, American tunebooks — anthologies published for the use of singing schools, choirs, and musical societies — made available almost 5,000 American-composed plain tunes, fugal tunes, set pieces, and anthems by some 260 composers, in 545 tunebook editions prepared by 143 compilers (almost 100 compilers also composed).⁵ This is the American part of an Anglo-American tradition that Billings, and usually Billings alone, represents in our late-20th-century concert halls, churches, and classrooms. It is a creative tradition that, on this side of the Atlantic, extended over half a century, and from Winthrop, Maine to Charleston, South Carolina; a tradition that embraced a wide variety of musical styles.

The general public badly needs human symbols — icons — to represent artistic movements and traditions. For early American psalmody, William Billings fills the bill. But the scholar needs something else: a sense of what the average practitioner within a tradition was like. What were his family background and education? Where did he live? How did he support himself? How did creative activity figure in his life? When in the course of his tradition's growth, flourishing, and decline was he active? What was the nature and the extent of his artistic contribution? How were his creative productions received in his day? Whom among his fellow artists was he in contact with? What was the

extent and nature of that contact? (The masculine pronoun is used here because American tunebook composers and compilers through the early 19th century were almost exclusively male.)

Much of William Billings's life is close to the biographical norm for American — and probably also English — psalmodists: the modest family background and equally modest occupation; the likely common-school education; the early start on composing and publishing sacred music; the teaching of singing schools; the large family; the membership in a singing society; the handful of musical acquaintances. But Billings's story, and the man himself, diverge from the norms for his tradition in several crucial respects, and it is because of these divergences that he cannot be considered an "average practitioner" in the early American psalmody tradition.

Billings the man has received ample attention in recent decades, and will not get much more of it here. Perhaps the most striking aspect of his personality, and at the same time of his talent — the fact that sets him off most distinctively from his contemporaries — is his obvious love of words. Billings, like Ives and Cowell and Cage, was a writer. His fugal tunes and anthems come to us, as do Ives's "Concord" piano sonata and Cage's chance-derived compositions, in a context of explanatory prose — personally introduced (as it were) by the composer, in the profuse introductions to such tunebooks as *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770) and *The Continental Harmony* (1794). But tunebook introductions were by no means the full extent of Billings's writing. It is well known that he authored the texts of several of his musical compositions, and he was probably person-

In much of Billings's writing a lively, likeable personality is displayed: chatty, ebullient, confiding, humorous; at times attractively self-deprecatory, at times quite carried away with the sounds and rhythms of words. Some of these same qualities infect Billings's music,...William Billings stands before us today as a human being in a way that no other early American psalmodist does,...

ally responsible for some of the prose pieces in the single issue of the *Boston Magazine* that he edited in 1783.⁶ In much of Billings's writing a lively, likeable personality is displayed: chatty, ebullient, confiding, humorous; at times attractively self-deprecatory, at times quite carried away with the sounds and rhythms of words. Some of these same qualities infect Billings's music, and parallels can be striking. Here, for example, is the composer's encomium on the futing tune, from a footnote to the introduction of his *Continental Harmony*:

It is an old maxim, and I think a very just one, viz. *that variety is always pleasing*, and it is well known that there is more variety in one piece of futing music, than in twenty pieces of plain song, for while the tones do most sweetly coincide and agree, the words are seemingly engaged in a musical warfare; and excuse the paradox if I further add, that each part seems determined by dint of harmony and strength of accent, to drown his competitor in an ocean of harmony, and while each part is thus mutually striving for mastery, and sweetly contending for victory, the audience are most luxuriously entertained, and exceedingly delighted; in the mean time, their minds are surprizingly agitated, and extremely fluctuated; sometimes declaring in favour of one part, and sometimes another. — Now the solemn bass demands their attention, now the manly tenor, now the lofty counter, now the volatile treble, now here, now there, now here again. — O enchanting! O ecstatic! Push on, push on ye sons of harmony, and

Discharge your deep mouth'd canon, full
fraught with Diapasons;
May you with Maestoso, rush on to
Choro-Grando,
And then with Vigoroso, let fly your
Diapentes
About our nervous system.

When one sets this passage side by side with one of Billings's more vigorous futing tunes (see Example 1, the concluding section of CREATION from *The Continental Harmony*), one finds him accomplishing in his prose and poetry what he accomplishes in his music — a dizzying multiplicity of entrances and exits, starts and stops, brought to a halt at last by a relatively formal gathering or coming-together of the various forces — a four-line poem at the close of the encomium, four measures of homophony at the end of the futing tune.⁷ None of Billings's contemporaries — even those whose prose writings appeared in print or have survived in manuscript, like Daniel Read and Andrew Law— revealed their personalities in words with the charm and color of Billings. This is a result of Billings's facility and fecundity, to be sure, but it is also a product of his personality. Because he was both a writer and a person of remarkable energy and originality, William Billings stands before us today as a human being in a way that no other early American psalmodist does, and with a vividness that is unmatched. By comparison even his most talented contemporaries seem mute, or indistinct.

Example 1

Creation (concluding section)

31

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

35

tune so long, should keep in tune, should keep in tune so long.

tune so long, Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in

long, Should keep in tune so long. Should

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long, should keep in

40

should keep in tune so long, should keep in tune so long,

tune, should keep in tune so long,

keep in tune so long, Should keep in tune so long,

tune so long, should keep in tune so long,

45

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long. so

Our life con - tains a thou - sand springs And dies if one be

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

50

long. so long. should keep in tune so

gone. Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long. should

should keep in tune so

Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

55 60

long. should keep in tune so long. Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

keep in tune so long. so long. Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

long. Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

tune, should keep in tune so long. Strange that a harp of thou - sand strings Should keep in tune so long.

Billings the composer has also received considerable scrutiny, and the high quality of his music has rightly evoked praise (though he is rivaled as a composer not only by such relatively well-known contemporaries as Daniel Read and Timothy Swan but also — on the strength, sometimes, of individual tunes of exceptional power — by such obscure American psalmodists as [Thomas?] Baird, John Bushnell, M. Kyes, and J. P. Storm). Billings's musical contribution is undeniably impressive, and this fact in itself further sets him off from his fellows and brands him as anything but an "average practitioner." On the matter of quality in Billings's music, suffice it here to make a single point — itself related to the preceding discussion of Billings the writer.

While many 18th-century New England composers could successfully handle the shorter forms of their tradition — plain tunes and fugal tunes, both usually setting single stanzas of text, with some counterpoint and text overlap in the fugal tune — few produced interesting settings of longer texts, whether prose (anthems) or poetry (set pieces). For the musically undertrained psalmist, American or English, a pitfall lurking in any larger piece was tonal monotony. Not really understanding harmonic modulation, composers of psalmody most often laid out their settings of anthem or set-piece texts entirely in one key, without even momentary tonal excursions elsewhere. When they attempted to vary their tonal palette, they usually did it by introducing sudden shifts of key — most often from the tonic to its relative or parallel minor or major; but these abrupt switches of mode lack the sense of drama produced by modulation in the sonata-form movements of contemporary European masters.

William Billings, however, almost alone in his generation, succeeded again and again in creating anthems and set pieces of considerable interest and charm. He accomplished this not because of a more finely developed harmonic sense, but because of something already remarked upon here — his unusual sensitivity to words. That sensitivity was equaled by, and in fact went hand in hand

with, Billings's natural flair for the *theatrical*: he saw the expressive possibilities in his texts, and realized those possibilities in full. He used just about every available musical means to imbue his longer pieces with dramatic interest, and keep listeners' attention engaged: range, rhythm, texture, melisma, silence, word-painting, repetition (sometimes obsessive), change (often sudden). What resulted was an unusually colorful and inventive declamatory style. Some examples of Billings's inventiveness in depicting text include:

- the remarkable anthem on "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks" (*The New-England Psalm-Singer*) holds our attention from its very first measures by an unanswered six-fold repetition of the initial text phrase ("As the hart panteth . . .," so — *what?*), but also by repeated low *divisi* bass notes and a sparse texture, the individual voice-parts entering and exiting, silence as much present as sound;

- the forward progress of LAMENTATION OVER BOSTON's text (Biblical words altered by Billings in *The Singing Master's Assistant* to reflect on the British occupation of Boston) is suspended while all four voices meditate melodically for seven measures on the single word "weeping";

- "I sat down" sits down intervallically, "sick" droops, "skipping" skips, and "rise up" rises up in the anthem on "I am the Rose of Sharon" (*The Singing Master's Assistant*);

- various musical concepts mentioned in the text of MODERN MUSIC (*The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*) — the key of E major, successive fugal entries, changes of meter and mode, scalar ascent and descent — are musically depicted;

- an huzza-ing crowd (gathered on the wharf to greet a shipload of sailors safely returned home) calls out "Welcome here again" in a riotous babble of eight separate statements in six measures of 2/4 time at the end of the anthem EUROCLYDON in *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*;

- the line "Then first humanity triumphant past the crystal ports of light" in AN ANTHEM FOR EASTER (printed as a separate

As a composer, Billings came first — or just about first — in his tradition, and his publishing debut at age 24, his *New-England Psalm-Singer* with its 127 original pieces, was surely as impressive in its day as it seems in ours.

issue) is hammered out in sixteen chords, all but two straight A major, and all but two eighth-note; and

— for an eighteen-measure section of the anthem on “O praise the Lord of heaven” in *The Continental Harmony*, the itemization of all who should praise the Lord (“creeping insects,” “old men and babes,” etc.) proceeds largely in a series of duets involving five of the six pairs possible with four voice parts.

In most of these cases it is clear that Billings is *seeing* a scene, much as a theatrical director envisions a scene on the stage, and translating his vivid visual images into sound. This gives his music an immediacy and tangibility — a theatricality — that surely has much to do with its success.⁸

Other facts relating to Billings’s oeuvre set him off from the pack, but not all of the pack: his prolificacy as a composer (considerable at 338-odd pieces, but small potatoes next to the output of Joseph Stone or Samuel Holyoke⁹), the large number of sacred-music publications he produced (sixteen, including six tunebook titles; dwarfed by Andrew Law’s forty-five¹⁰), the popularity of his music in his day (eight tunes in the Core Repertory of early American psalmody, to Daniel Read’s nine¹¹). But a truly important distinction about Billings’s work is its chronological priority. As a composer, Billings came first — or just about first — in his tradition, and his publishing debut at age 24, his *New-England Psalm-Singer* with its 127 original pieces, was surely as impressive in its day as it seems in ours. Because Billings was there from the start, vibrantly and creatively there, he naturally exerted a strong influence on the New England church musicians who came into contact with him or his work. The young Daniel Read (1757-1836) seems to have modeled his earliest compositions on those of

Billings;¹² Jacob French (1754-1817) and possibly Abraham Maxim (1773-1829) learned the rudiments of vocal music from Billings; the young Timothy Swan (1758-1842), hearing of Billings in the mid-1770s, “felt such a desire to see him, that he was strongly tempted to run away from his brother-in-law, of whom he was learning his trade, in order, that he might have an opportunity of gratifying his wishes in this respect” (Swan did later seek out Billings in Boston).¹³ Issuing his first collection before the Revolution and remaining musically active well into the 1790s, Billings was not only a progenitor of but a continuing influence on New England psalmody.

More than anything else, however, it is the where and not the when of Billings’s career that sets him apart from his contemporaries and makes him incapable of accurately representing the tradition of which he is the obvious symbol. Apart from singing-school forays to several towns in eastern Massachusetts (and at least once to the District of Maine¹⁴), Billings seems to have spent his entire life in Boston. In a 1979 essay, Richard Crawford identified only four of 111 American-born early tunebook compilers as having started out life in a large city; since then three names have been added to that short list.¹⁵ Of these seven men, only Billings and perhaps two others remained city-dwellers throughout their lives.¹⁶ In the same study, Crawford found just two composers of psalmody (out of 100 born in America) who were natives of large cities.¹⁷ With one addition from more recent research, we now have three: Peter Erben and Francis Hopkinson of Philadelphia — and William Billings of Boston. Pointing out that the vast majority of American tunebook musicians started their lives in small Massachusetts and Connecticut towns and that many never left

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these essentially rural surroundings, Crawford characterized American psalmody as an art “whose creative roots run deepest in village and countryside and among the plain people who dwell there, rather than in the more sophisticated centers of civilization.”¹⁸ Clearly, Billings is not part of this pattern.

As a Bostonian, Billings was exposed all his life to the latest influences and importations, both material and cultural, from Europe — including musical publications, musicians, and musical fashions, and a certain amount of theatre as well.¹⁹ Boston, after all, was the liveliest point of contact between the cultures of old and New England; and while it is clear that Billings could not absorb everything that imported English culture had to offer, it is also clear that his music would have been quite different without the continued stimulus of these particular surroundings. In several respects the coastal cities of 18th-century America (as Carl Bridenbaugh has suggested) were more closely tied to Europe, particularly to London, than to the small towns and villages westward.²⁰ Active ports enjoyed a steady influx of goods and visitors from across the Atlantic, but poor roads and the lack of efficient transport on the few major rivers hampered inland travel, so that visiting European performers (both musical and theatrical) preferred to follow port-to-port itineraries rather than to penetrate the interior. At the same time, the cities’ concentration of wealth meant that larger churches could install organs, that concert halls could be built and concert series established, that musical emporia could flourish. The larger cities also attracted musical émigrés of talent and enterprise. In Boston, for example, William Morgan and William Selby introduced the music of Handel, J. C. Bach, Thomas Arne, and William Boyce in

numerous concerts. Not only Boston but other coastal New England towns and cities such as Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Salem, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island enjoyed cultural lives unimaginable in such inland communities as Worcester, Massachusetts or Concord, New Hampshire.

How did William Billings’s city life influence his composing? It is never easy to separate the marks of a person’s individual genius from those of his or her surroundings, but in Billings’s case several environmental influences seem clear. The first is the press of political and military events. In the 1770s Boston experienced firsthand or at a close remove some of the most important early occurrences associated with the War for Independence. Billings, allied with Boston’s patriot faction, gave verbal and musical expression to the feelings unleashed by these events in such pieces as CHESTER, INDEPENDENCE, LAMENTATION OVER BOSTON, and RETROSPECT. These patriotic works speak stirringly of their time and place — all the more so because military events and personages are presented in parodies of Biblical passages that would have been well-known to 18th-century New Englanders.²¹ But that does not make them or their composer particularly representative of psalmody, a tradition that sought to express truths outside of time and space. And, in fact, Billings was practically alone among the New England psalmodists in giving immediate voice to Revolutionary sentiments, then including these patriotic effusions in his sacred tunebooks.

Parallel to these topical tunes and anthems are Billings’s Christmas pieces. Christmas in early America is the subject of a thorough study recently completed by historian Stephen Nissenbaum. Although the celebra-

tion of Christmas on these shores is popularly supposed to have gotten underway only in the mid-19th century, Nissenbaum has had to extend his account back into the 1600s. And while he has found extensive documentation of Christmas observances among Protestant New Englanders both urban and rural, Evangelical and Arminian, he has found no early American musician more creatively engaged with Christmas than William Billings of Boston.²²

A handful of Christmas texts were set again and again by 18th-century American psalmodists. Easily the most popular was a stanza which first appeared in *A Supplement to the New Version of Psalms by Dr. [Nicholas] Brady and Mr. [Nahum] Tate* (1700); its opening line is “While shepherds watched their flocks by night.” Billings set this text twice (in BETHLEHEM and CHARLSTON); he also set a popular verse by Isaac Watts beginning “Shepherds, rejoice, lift up your eyes” (BOSTON). But he ranged further than Brady and Tate or Watts, composing a setting (JUDEA) of the anonymous English carol “A Virgin unspotted, the prophet foretold,” a text which few if any of his American contemporaries set. He also produced a lengthy Christmas anthem whose text was constructed from the Bible, Watts, and elsewhere (“Hark! hark! hear you not,” in *The Continental Harmony*). And he wrote two Christmas texts of his own. One, set to the tune EMANUEL in *The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement*, is a rough paraphrase of the Brady and Tate hymn quoted above, with some charmingly Billingsian expansions: while the 1700 text simply has the shepherds “All seated on the ground,” Billings shows them “Promisc’usly seated, estranged from sleep.” One of Billings’s best-known Christmas pieces, SHILOH, sets an original text which he copiously footnoted with related scriptural passages. Whatever the reason for this scholarly apparatus, no such pedantry infects Billings’s words or music, which tell the story of Christ’s birth with tuneful directness. Billings’s undisguised enjoyment of the Christmas story — his creative engagement with it both as poet and as musician — would likely have found little support from

established religion away from New England’s coast and outside of its cities.

A third group of pieces by Billings likely reflects his urban environment. Secular, humorous, even outrageous, these speak primarily in the voice of the artist rather than the believer. There are only a handful, but they betray a sensibility which might feel quite at home in the late 20th century. JARGON was the first to appear, in *The Singing Master’s Assistant* of 1778. If one is to believe Billings’s lengthy address “To the GODDESS of DISCORD” which appears in that tunebook’s introductory material, JARGON was written in response to some who maintained that Billings’s music was entirely made up of consonant sounds. It is more likely that having written a text about what may happen to him and his muse if he forgets his “dear Town” and “native Place” of Boston — the text that ends LAMENTATION OVER BOSTON, also in *The Singing Master’s Assistant* — Billings simply had the idea to compose a second setting of that text whose music was worthy of the words:

Let horrid Jargon split the Air,
And rive the Nerves asunder,
Let hateful Discord greet the Ear,
As terrible as Thunder.

And the music indeed proves itself appropriate to the text, with an unbroken string of twenty-nine dissonant chords (see Example 2).

Though almost surely not intended for performance, JARGON is nevertheless prophetic of the present era in its “emancipation of the dissonance.” The self-reflexive CONSONANCE and MODERN MUSIC — both in *The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement* of 1781 — are appropriate to late 20th-century sensibilities in a different way: each is a piece about a piece, intended for performances about performance. CONSONANCE, setting a poem by Mather Byles titled “On Music,” was probably written first; as Byles’s lines describe various musical phenomena, they are depicted in Billings’s music. Writing this “anthem” (as he termed it) probably gave Billings the impetus to try a similar piece, and MODERN MUSIC — its text surely original — was the result. It is a much more radical piece than CONSONANCE. While the Byles

Example 2

Jargon

Forte

Let hor - rid Jar - gon split the Air, And

Let hor - rid Jar - gon split the Air, And

Let hor - rid Jar - gon split the Air, And

Let hor - rid Jar - gon split the Air, And

5

rive the Nerves a - sun - der, Let hate - ful Dis - cord

rive the Nerves a - sun - der, Let hate - ful Dis - cord

rive the Nerves a - sun - der, Let hate - ful Dis - cord

rive the Nerves a - sun - der, Let hate - ful Dis - cord

10

Fortissimo

greet the Ear, As ter - ri - ble as Thun - der.

greet the Ear, As ter - ri - ble as Thun - der.

greet the Ear, As ter - ri - ble as Thun - der.

greet the Ear, As ter - ri - ble as Thun - der.

poem is a conservative, even classical ode to music's powers, Billings's text for MODERN MUSIC seems part of no literary tradition. MODERN MUSIC might well be subtitled, after the model of the Byles poem, "On Musical Performance"; we are not presented here with abstract phenomena of sound but with actual events, occurring in an actual present. Not only that: we, the audience, are ourselves present — seated with high expectations at the start (Example 3a), applauding at the end (Example 3b). The level of self-consciousness is much higher, and the result is truly "modern music"—a piece two centuries ahead of its time.

Billings's musical reflections on current events, his embracing of Christmas, his playful commentaries on music and the activities of musicians, his interpolations of topical references into texts drawn from Scripture, and the wide range of his text sources (including original material) are all unusual within his tradition. They signal an expanded sense of possibilities for the choral medium, and also a certain artistic self-consciousness. Neither of these traits is particularly discernible in the music of Billings's New England contemporaries, for both traits are concomitant to residence in a large city, with its varied and stimulating cultural life.

This discussion of individual works by William Billings that reflect Boston's urban culture and thereby place their composer outside the norm for New England psalmody has been largely text-oriented, or thematic. Billings's music itself also betrays its urban origins. The composer's flair for the dramatic was remarked on earlier. From a musical standpoint, many of Billings's pieces — not only his anthems and set pieces but his shorter works as well — have an almost theatrical grandeur, evident in their sweeping lines, their full chords, their sometimes portentous, sometimes almost delirious repetitions, their sudden changes of texture and rhythm. This dramatic, grandiose quality is largely absent in the music of Billings's contemporaries, for its sources are not to be found in the tradition of Anglo-American psalmody but, much more likely, in the oratorios of George Frideric Handel, the organ playing of William Selby, the ballad operas

of Thomas Arne — music heard only in the metropolis. Even a short, simple "plain tune" (an entirely homophonic setting, with no text repetition or overlap) like *The New-England Psalm-Singer's* CHESTERFIELD becomes impressive with Billings's massive chords — many have eight different notes — and his spectacularly low second bass, which sits on the D below the staff for most of the piece and in one phrase casually descends through a sixth to the C two octaves below middle C.²³

A strong bass was one of two recommendations Billings made regarding the disposition of voices in choral performances. These recommendations, in turn, suggest a sound-ideal in Billings's mind that he may have picked up from the Boston concerts of such impresarios as Stephen Deblois, Josiah Flagg, William Turner, James Juhan (or Joan), and later William Selby and William Morgan.²⁴ It is a sound-ideal that has more to do with the large choral groups and instrumentally-accompanied oratorios heard in city churches and concert halls than with the small choirs and a cappella psalm tunes heard in country parishes. Billings expressed his opinion on the importance of a strong bass this way, in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.

In order to have good Music, there must be Three Bass to one of the upper Parts. So that for Instance, suppose a Company of Forty People, Twenty of them should sing the Bass, the other Twenty should be divided according to the Discretion of the Company into the upper Parts, six or seven of the deepest Voices should sing the Ground Bass . . . which if well sung together with the upper Parts, is most Majestic, and so exceeding Grand as to cause the Floor to tremble, as I myself have often experienced.²⁵

Karl Kroeger has shown that several later tunebook compilers more or less echoed Billings's call for a large, commanding bass sound.²⁶ So this aspect of Billings's sound-ideal was apparently not exceptional in early New England psalmody.

However, Billings's other recommendation relating to the disposition of voices — that the tenor melody be doubled one octave up by some trebles and the treble line be doubled one octave down by some tenors — seems not to have caught on with his con-

Example 3a

Modern Music

NB after the Audience are seated & the Performers have taken the pitch slyly from the Leader the Song begins

5

To

We are met for a Con - cert of mod - ern in - ven - tion;

We are met for a Con - cert of mod - ern in - ven - tion; To

10

tick - le the Ear is our pres - ent in - ten - tion. The Au - di - ence are

The Au - di - ence are

The Au - di - ence are

15

seat - ed ex - pect - ing to be treat - ed with a piece of the Best, with a piece of the best.

seat - ed ex - pect - ing to be treat - ed with a piece of the Best, with a piece of the best.

seat - ed ex - pect - ing to be treat - ed with a piece of the Best, with a piece of the best.

seat - ed ex - pect - ing to be treat - ed with a piece of the Best, with a piece of the best.

Example 3b

Modern Music (conclusion)

90

'tis the part of the hear - ers to clap their Ap - plause, to —

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temporaries. Billings first discussed tenor-treble doubling in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*:

A Man may sing a Treble the Eighth below, and a Woman a Tenor the Eighth above, and then they will act upon Principles of Nature, and may then make good Music, for every Eighth or Octave in Effect is the same.²⁷

Twenty-four years later, in the introduction to his *Continental Harmony*, Billings was more effusive on the subject of doubling:

If a man sings [the treble line] as a Medius [that is, in the middle range], and a woman as a Treble, it is then in effect as two parts; so likewise, if a man sing a Tenor with a masculine and a woman with a feminine voice [i.e., in their own natural ranges an octave apart], the Tenor is as full as two parts, and a tune so sung, (although it has but four parts) is in effect the same as six. Such a conjunction of masculine and feminine voices is beyond expression, sweet and ravishing . . .²⁸

Perhaps on the strength of Billings's endorsement, tenor-treble doubling at some point became standard practice among Southern shape-note singers, who are the most faithful present-day performers of early New England psalmody (as well as its English antecedent and its Southern offspring). Because Billings recommended it and shape-note singers practice it, doubling has been assumed to be the norm for psalmody by many modern performers and scholars. But both Richard Crawford and Karl Kroeger have recently pointed out that recommendations of doubling are extremely rare in the introductory material of early American tunebooks.²⁹ Crawford and Kroeger mention one publication in addition to Billings's two — a 1797 anthem by Isaac Lane — as supporting the practice of octave doubling. It's worth noting that Lane, a native of Bedford, Massachusetts (just outside Boston), was in touch with Boston-area reformers Hans Gram, Oliver Holden, and Samuel Holyoke in the six years preceding his anthem's publication. To Billings and Lane can be added New York organist Peter Erben, who appears to have sanctioned tenor doubling of treble melodies in his *Sacred Music* (1808); and possibly Jonathan Benjamin of Hartford, Connecticut, who in his *Harmonia Coelestis* of 1799 ob-

served that "the music will be much more full and complete" if tenors "perform the Seconds, or upper part, together with the Second Treble."³⁰ Thus of 545 pre-1811 American sacred-music editions, perhaps five come out in favor of doubling. And all five were the work of individuals surrounded by or in contact with urban musical life.

In the late 20th century it is easy to minimize or even overlook the impact of geographical distance in 17th- and 18th-century America. There is abundant evidence from this period of major theological, political, economic, and cultural disparities between coastal and interior, urban and rural New England. Suffice it here only to mention four Massachusetts examples:

— Shays's rebellion of 1786-87 pitted impoverished farmers of the western counties against wealthy seaport merchants and members of the state legislature in Boston;³¹

— Nicholas Brady and Nahum Tate's *New Version* of the Psalms, widely used in eastern Massachusetts churches, never penetrated further west than Templeton in the upper central part of the state and Sturbridge midway along the Massachusetts-Connecticut border;³²

— the Great Awakening of the 1730s, resisted by Boston's "Old Light" Congregationalists, had its origins in the revivalist sermons of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton, Massachusetts on the Connecticut River;³³ and

— the mid-18th century saw the development of a distinctive Connecticut River Valley style of doorway, particular to that area and unknown in Massachusetts Bay.³⁴

The central and western parts of Massachusetts were sufficiently remote to provide political asylum—not only at the Revolution's outset in 1775 when Whig-sympathizer Isaiah Thomas moved his printing press from Boston to Worcester, but as late as the War of 1812 when the English émigré musician George Knowil Jackson was exiled to Northampton as an enemy alien.

In matters relating to sacred music, fundamental differences of outlook between New England's coastal and interior regions are evident throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th. As early as 1723 — when

“regular singing” had taken Boston by storm, replacing the relatively anarchic, improvisatory “old way” with a controlled, coordinated style dependent upon musical literacy, practice, and leadership — Reverend Cotton Mather wrote an English acquaintance:

Tho’ in the more polite City of *Boston*, this Design [of teaching regular singing] mett with a General acceptance, in the Countrey, where they have more of the *Rustick*, some Numbers of Elder and Angry people bore zealous Testimonies against these wicked Innovations, and this bringing in of Popery [i.e., practices of the Roman Catholic Church].³⁵

Half a century later, “Elder and Angry people” in small inland communities were still bearing “zealous Testimonies” against “wicked Innovations” in the music of the meetinghouse. The Worcester, Massachusetts church voted in August 1779 to abolish the practice of “lining out” the Psalms and hymns (that is, having a deacon read each line of text before it was sung), and also to have those in the church who were more skilled in singing sit together in the meetinghouse and lead the rest of the congregation in that part of the service. A town history reports that

The sabbath succeeding the adoption of these votes, after the hymn had been read by the minister, the aged and venerable Deacon Chamberlain, unwilling to desert the custom of his fathers, rose, and read the first line according to his usual practice. The singers, prepared to carry the alteration into effect, proceeded, without pausing at [the first line’s] conclusion: the white haired officer of the church, with the full power of his voice, read on, until the louder notes of the collected body overpowered the attempt to resist the progress of improvement, and the deacon, deeply mortified at the triumph of musical reformation, seized his hat, and retired from the meeting house, in tears. His conduct was censured by the church, and he was, for a time, deprived of its communion, for absenting himself from the public services of the sabbath.³⁶

It is instructive to remember that one year previous to this battle for singing leadership in the Worcester church, a tanner in Boston — just forty miles to the east — had published his second all-original collection of

music, largely intended for church use yet including the dissonant joke-piece JARGON, the topical anthem LAMENTATION OVER BOSTON, and an anthem on a sensual text from the Song of Solomon, “I am the Rose of Sharon.” Clearly, Deacon Jacob Chamberlain and composer William Billings inhabited very different cultural worlds. The average American psalmist can probably be located somewhere between these two extremes.

Who might this average practitioner, this representative American psalmist be? Recent biographical research suggests some qualifications for the post.³⁷ There is no doubt that this man should spend all or most of his life in small New England towns, although he is free to move about some if he likes.³⁸ He should probably be a Congregationalist. His family will almost certainly be large. His income will derive only partly from teaching and perhaps publishing sacred music; more of it will come from farming, common-school teaching, a craft, a trade, or (very likely) a combination of occupations. He may hold a few public offices in his lifetime; in fact he may even stand out in his community for his leadership, his unusual literacy, or both. He should not be too prolific as a composer or compiler—perhaps several dozen pieces, one tunebook—nor should his music attain an inordinate level of popularity. (The music itself will be plain, sturdy, often in the minor mode; it may have a hint of folksong influence; and it will certainly include some fusing.) Finally, this representative psalmist should certainly keep to an absolute minimum his settings of anything but the most standard kinds of sacred texts; Isaac Watts’s hymns and Psalm versifications are to be preferred as text sources. No patriotic pieces, except perhaps a dirge on the death of Washington; no musical jokes; perhaps one piece on the Nativity.

Unsurprisingly, few actual individuals meet all these qualifications. Supply Belcher (1751-1836) of Farmington in the District of Maine comes close, but the representativeness of a composer referred to during his lifetime as “the Handel of Maine” has to be suspect. Joseph Stone (1758-1837) of Ward (later Auburn), Massachusetts is very close in

several respects, but he was also probably the most prolific 18th-century American composer, with a couple thousand pieces to his credit. Nehemiah Shumway (1761-1843), born in Oxford, Massachusetts, and Alexander Ely (ca. 1762-1848), a native of West Springfield in the same state, are attractive candidates, but they published their tunebooks outside of New England. Lewis Edson (1748-1820) of Bridgewater and later Lanesboro, Massachusetts is a strong candidate even without a tunebook to his name, but he was Episcopalian. Oliver Brownson (1746-1815) was a Baptist; Jacob Kimball (1761-1826) went to Harvard; Timothy Swan may never have taught singing schools; Oliver Holden (1765-1844) and Stephen Jenks (1772-1856), along with Daniel Read, were exceptionally active as tunebook publishers. If one is willing to relax one's standards a bit, however, there are plenty of individuals who will do. Daniel Belknap (1771-1815), for example, lived most of his life in Framingham, Massachusetts, had a common-school education, was a Mason, a "Captain" (probably in the local militia), and almost certainly a Congregationalist, fathered five children, worked as a farmer and a mechanic, taught singing schools (including as an itinerant), composed 89 pieces and published four tunebooks (those numbers are a bit on the high side), also published a secular songster, was acquainted or corresponded with several other tunebook musicians, composed in a "mainstream" New England psalmody style, set an ode written in memory of General Washington, was no stranger to the futing tune. Belknap serves quite well as a representative American psalmody, if someone must play the role; but the list of qualifications may actually be more useful than a single exemplar. One thing is certain: Daniel Belknap and his music will never catch the popular imagination as a symbol of young, feisty, independent America in the way William Billings and his music have. Billings is clearly not representative of his generation; just as clearly, he is that generation's representative. And he is likely to keep the job.

Notes

1. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D., Pastor of East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1905-1914), vol. 2, 351.
2. David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Hans Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents*, *Bibliographies in American Music* 2 (Detroit: Information Coordinators, for The College Music Society, 1976).
3. Karl Kroeger, Hans Nathan, and Richard Crawford, eds., *The Complete Works of William Billings*, 4 vols. (Boston: The American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-1990).
4. His Majestie's Clerkes conducted by Paul Hillier, *"A Land of Pure Delight": Anthems and Futing Tunes by William Billings*, Harmonia Mundi France HMU 907048 (Los Angeles: Harmonia Mundi USA, 1992).
5. The numbers of composers, compositions, tunebook compilers, and tunebook editions come from three sources: Allen Perdue Britton, Irving Lowens, and Richard Crawford, *American Sacred Music Imprints 1698-1810: A Bibliography* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1990); Richard Crawford, "A Historian's Introduction to Early American Music," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 89, no. 2 (October 1979); and Nym Cooke, "American Psalmody in Contact and Collaboration, 1770-1820" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1990).
6. All of these various kinds of writing are discussed by McKay and Crawford in *William Billings of Boston*; see especially chapter 4, headed "Composer, Poet, Author, Editor."
7. The encomium and the futing tune appear in full on successive openings of McKay and Crawford's *William Billings of Boston*; see pages 176-[179], including the authors' comments on "declamatory momentum" in Billings's music and "the snowballing effect of which Billings was so fond" (178). Elsewhere, McKay and Crawford note the "sense of tumbling poetical inevitability" that characterizes some of Billings's best writing (86).

While CREATION's closing homophony is unusually discrete and formal, some kind of homophonic "gathering" is common to the ends of most futing tunes.

8. For another view of why Billings's anthems succeed so well — having to do with his "desire to create, implant, or maintain a degree of metrical structure" in the prose texts he chose — see McKay and Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*, 95-102, especially 98-101.

9. For the total number of Billings's compositions, I am indebted to Karl Kroeger, comp., *Catalog of the Musical Works of William Billings*, Music Reference Collection 32 (New York, Westport Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1991). Wanda Jean Criger Eddy, "Joseph Stone (1758-1837), an Early American Tunesmith" (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1987), 1, states that Stone wrote "almost two thousand hymns, anthems and futing tunes"; most of these are in MSS copy. My own count of Samuel Holyoke's works, both published and in manuscript, shows that he wrote as many as 850 sacred pieces.

10. These numbers of sacred music publications are drawn from Britton, Lowens, and Crawford, *American Sacred Music Imprints* (ASMI). For both Billings and Law, titles and editions were counted, but not variant issues (e.g., ASMI 109A, a variant issue of the first edition of Billings's *Singing Master's Assistant*, was not included in the count). Two titles by Law were not counted: *The Art of Playing the Organ and Piano Forte* ([1809]) and *Mr. Adgate's New Plan of Solfaing* ([1792]).

11. Richard Crawford analyzed the contents of all sacred-music issues published in this country before 1811 and came up with a list of the 101 pieces most often printed in those publications. These works, both European and American, are edited and discussed in Richard Crawford, ed., *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*, Recent Researches in American Music 11-12 (Madison: A-R Editions, 1984).

12. For the influence of Billings's music on Read, abundantly evident in Read's musical manuscript of 1774-77, see Cooke, "American

Psalmody in Contact and Collaboration," 241-81.

13. E. Webster, "Memoir of Timothy Swan," MS. in Timothy Swan Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., [3].

14. For Billings's sojourn in Maine, see Nym Cooke, "William Billings in the District of Maine, 1780," *American Music* vol. 9, no. 3 (Fall 1991), [243]-59.

15. Crawford, "A Historian's Introduction to Early American Music," 290. Crawford lists Billings, Jonathan Badger, Francis Hopkinson, and Isaiah Thomas as city-born compilers; John Burger, Jr., Peter Erben, and Cornelius Tiebout were also born in cities.

16. Jonathan Badger and possibly John Burger, Jr. may have remained in urban areas all their lives.

17. Crawford, "A Historian's Introduction to Early American Music," 289.

18. *Ibid.*, 291.

19. For an account of "theatrical entertainments" in Boston (including private readings, and plays produced by British General John Burgoyne in 1776) between the 1750 "Act for Preventing Stage-Plays and Other Theatrical Entertainments" and the end of the century, see Cynthia Adams Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music in Early Massachusetts," in Barbara Lambert, ed., *Music in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1820, II: Music in Homes and Churches* (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1985), 827-67.

20. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 481; quoted in Crawford, "A Historian's Introduction to Early American Music," 281.

21. For a discussion of how Billings "supports the topical with the timeless" in works such as these, see McKay and Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*, 97-98.

22. Nissenbaum's work on Christmas music in early New England will be set forth most fully in an article for the 1996 *Annual Proceedings* of The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, to be issued in 1997. I am grateful to Dr. Nissenbaum for sharing the text of his article with me.

23. CHESTERFIELD is marvellously sung by the Oregon State University Choir conducted by Ron Jeffers on *Make a Joyful Noise*:

Mainstreams and Backwaters of American Psalmody, New World Records CD 80255-2 (New York: Recorded Anthology of American Music, 1996).

24. For the activities of these and other Boston musicians, see Appendix C, "Music Masters in Colonial Boston," by Barbara Lambert, in Lambert, ed., *Music in Colonial Massachusetts*, vol. 2, 935-1157. *The Boston Evening-Post* of 5 November 1764 announced that tickets for a concert at Stephen Deblois's Concert Hall would be available "at Mr. Billings's Shop near the Post-Office" (quoted in Lambert, 1017).

25. This passage appears in Karl Kroeger, ed., *The Complete Works of William Billings, Volume I: The New-England Psalm-Singer (1770)* (Boston: The American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981), 30. Billings provides the following footnote: "All Notes that descend below G Gamut in the Bass, occasion an agreeable Tremor [of the floor]. But in my Opinion double D, viz. (an Octave below the Middle Line of the Bass) is the most commanding and Majestick of any Sound in Nature." This "double D" is the very note that sounds through all but about three measures of CHESTERFIELD.

26. See Karl Kroeger, ed., *The Complete Works of William Billings, Volume IV: The Continental Harmony (1794)* (Boston: The American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1990), xl-xli.

27. This passage appears in Kroeger, ed., *The Complete Works of William Billings*, vol. 1, 17.

28. This passage appears in Kroeger, ed., *The Complete Works of William Billings*, vol. 4, 18.

29. See, for example, Crawford, ed., *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*, xix, n. 38; Kroeger, ed., *The Complete Works of William Billings*, vol. 4, xl, n. 26; and Kroeger, ed., *Daniel Read: Collected Works*, Recent Researches in American Music 24, Music of the United States of America 4 (Madison: A-R Editions, 1995), xxix.

30. The relevant passages from Erben's and Benjamin's books are quoted in Britton,

Lowens, and Crawford, *American Sacred Music Imprints*, 259, 168.

31. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 301-04.

32. Peter Benes, "Psalmody in Coastal Massachusetts and in the Connecticut River Valley," in Benes, ed., *The Bay and the River: 1600-1900*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, *Annual Proceedings* 1981 (Boston: Boston University, 1982), 119, 122-23.

33. Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, 151.

34. Amelia F. Miller, "Connecticut River Valley Doorways: An Eighteenth-Century Flowering," in Benes, ed., *The Bay and the River*, 60.

35. Quoted in Henry Wilder Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1961), 109.

36. William Lincoln, *History of Worcester, Massachusetts, from its Earliest Settlement to September, 1836* (Worcester: M. D. Phillips and Company, 1837), 179.

37. The author's doctoral dissertation, *American Psalmodists in Contact and Collaboration*, was part of a larger project, "Lives of the Psalmodists," which involved collecting and computerizing a large amount of biographical material on the tunebook composers and compilers of Billings's generation.

38. The "itinerant tunesmith" is, however, something of a myth; see Nym Cooke, "Itinerant Yankee Singing Masters in the Eighteenth Century," in Peter Benes, ed., *Itinerancy in New England and New York*, The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, *Annual Proceedings* 1984 (Boston: Boston University, 1986): 16-36.

