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# William Billings: A Biographical Overview

By Sondra W. Howe

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Two-hundred and fifty years ago, William Billings was born in Boston on October 7. A colorful character with a sense of humor, he was slovenly dressed and physically unattractive, and although self-taught, he became highly-respected as a musician. He was influenced by the theoretical writings of William Tans'ur and other English psalmodists. We know few details about his life, but he probably attended singing schools and choral societies and received some instruction from singing masters.

Billings taught at a singing school with John Barry, a tenor in the choir at New South Church, in 1769. Billings was respected as a successful singing master, teaching in Boston's fashionable churches, including Brattle Street Church, Old South Church, First Church, and Stone Chapel. He also taught singing schools in Providence, Rhode Island, and Stoughton, Massachusetts. Lucy Swan, a student in the Stoughton singing school, married Billings and they had nine children.<sup>1</sup>

By 1780 Billings was affluent enough to purchase a house on Newbury Street, and he was a pew holder at the Hollis Street church. Although he earned money from his teaching and publications, Billings also had to work as a tanner to support his family. In the late 1780s he worked as a scavenger, cleaning the streets in Ward 11; as a hogreeve, keeping the hogs off the streets; and as a Sealer of Leather

for Boston. His fortunes declined in the late 1780s, and in 1790 there was even a concert for the financial benefit of Billings' family. When his wife died in 1795, he was left with five daughters and a son, all under the age of eighteen. Billings died 26 September 1800, and was buried in an unmarked grave.<sup>2</sup>

## Sources and Publications

*The Complete Works of William Billings* has been published by the American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> Many performing editions of his compositions are listed in *Music in Print*.<sup>4</sup> The life of Billings has been described by McKay and Crawford in *William Billings of Boston*. Barbour, in *The Church Music of William Billings*, analyzes the musical style of Billings. Nathan, *William Billings, Data and Documents*, and Kroeger, *Catalog of the Musical Works of William Billings*, have published material on the compositions of Billings.<sup>5</sup> Articles about Billings have been written by Lindstrom, Crawford and McKay, Kroeger, and Daniels.<sup>6</sup>

Important research on eighteenth-century American music has been done by two music educators, Allen Britton and Alan Buechner. Britton wrote his dissertation on "Theoretical Introductions in American Tune-Books to 1800." He has recently worked with Irving Lowens and Richard Crawford to publish *American Sacred Music Imprints* and has published an article on "The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America."<sup>7</sup> Buechner wrote his dissertation on "Yankee Singing Schools" and has produced a record, *The New England Harmony*, with detailed notes on Billings.<sup>8</sup>

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Billings himself published over three-hundred compositions of choral music, six tune books, plus individual pieces. He wrote psalm and hymn tunes, futing tunes, canons, and anthems. Where Billings defined the anthem as "a divine song, generally in prose,"<sup>9</sup> futing-tunes, for which he was justly famous, were quite different. The futing tune should not be confused with the Baroque fugue. The first section of a futing tune is homophonic; the second section is polyphonic, with each voice making its successive entry imitating the preceding voice. The motive of a futing tune usually begins in the bass line and then climbs. Billings describes futing as:

Notes flying after each other, altho' not always the same sound. Music is said to be Futing, when one part comes in after another; its beauties cannot be numbered, it is sufficient to say, that it is universally pleasing.<sup>10</sup>

*The New-England Psalm-Singer; or, American Chorister; Containing a Number of Psalm-tunes, Anthems and Canons in Four and Five Parts*, published by Edes and Gill in Boston in 1770, was the first publication consisting entirely of American music, and the first tune book by a single American composer. The frontispiece was engraved by Paul Revere. The tune book begins with "An Introduction to the Rules of Musick" where details of scales, musical notation, keys, etc. are explained for the beginner. Billings also saw fit to include "An Essay on the Nature and Properties of Sound" by the physician Charles Stockbridge.

*The New-England Psalm-Singer* contains 127 compositions including psalm and hymn tunes, four anthems, four canons, and one set-piece.<sup>11</sup> Since this tune book was mostly textless, singers would supply the texts from other books they owned. To choose one example from this collection, the canon "When Jesus Wept," has come to be considered one of the masterpieces of early American music. Nevertheless, Billings was extremely critical of his first publication, calling it an "infant production of my own Numb-Skull" and "my Reuben, my first-born."<sup>12</sup>

Describing the process of composition, the independent Billings said composers should claim a kind of musical license, a freedom

from following rules, in the same way that writers have a poetical license.

...for my own Part, as I don't think myself confin'd to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me, neither should I think (were I to pretend to lay down Rules) that any who came after me were any ways obligated to adhere to them, any further than they should think proper: So in fact, I think it is best for every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*. Therefore, upon this Consideration, for me to dictate, or pretend to prescribe Rules of this Nature for others, would not only be very unnecessary, but also a great Piece of Vanity.<sup>13</sup>

*The Singing Master's Assistant, or Key to Practical Music*, published in Boston by Draper and Folsom in 1778, was the first tune book published in America after the outbreak of the Revolution. Written specifically for singing schools, this tune book was Billings' most popular publication, going through four editions. It contains seventy-one compositions for four voices, with full text, including eight anthems and one set-piece. It was advertised as "an abridgement from the New-England Psalm-Singer together with several other tunes, never before published." Billings selected and corrected many tunes from his first publication for *The Singing Master's Assistant*.

The tune book contains a theoretical introduction for teachers in singing schools, rules for a singing school, a dictionary, and other writings. Billings wrote a humorous account "To the Goddess of Discord" and a satire, "An Historical Account of G. Gamut."

Billings applied for copyright for his first two tune books. He wanted to protect his compositions from being copied into compilations by other authors, but his attempt was unsuccessful. In 1772 the Massachusetts legislature approved the copyright of *The New-England Psalm-Singer* but the governor refused to sign it. There may have been political reasons for this refusal since Billings was sympathetic to the movement towards American independence, and he had friends who were active patriots. In 1778 Billings' petition for the copyright of *The Singing Master's Assistant* was rejected. By 1786 the copyright laws in Massachusetts had changed and

“...I don’t think myself confin’d to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me, neither should I think (were I to pretend to lay down Rules) that any who came after me were any ways obligated to adhere to them... I think it is best for every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*.”

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Billings was granted copyright for *The Suffolk Harmony* when he deposited two copies in the Harvard College Library.<sup>14</sup>

*Music in Miniature: Containing a Collection of Psalm Tunes of Various Metres* was published by Billings in 1779. It is a small, textless tune supplement containing seventy-four compositions for four voices by American and European composers. This is the only tune book he published with music by other composers. The textless psalm tunes were to be used with metrical psalters.

*The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement, Containing a Number of Fuging Pieces and Anthems Composed by William Billings* was published by Billings in 1781. The twenty-four compositions with full text include six anthems and five set-pieces. There is no introductory instruction, since the book was published for advanced singers.

*The Suffolk Harmony, Consisting of Psalm Tunes, Fuges and Anthems Composed by William Billings* was published in Boston by J. Norman in 1786. It contains thirty-two compositions for four voices with full text and includes two anthems and one set-piece.

*The Continental Harmony: Containing a Number of Anthems, Fuges, and Choruses in Several Parts* was published in Boston by Thomas and Andrews in 1794. It was sponsored by several musical societies to help the “distressed situation of Mr. Billings’ family.” The fifty-one compositions with full text include seventeen anthems and one set-piece for four voices. The tune book has an introductory section on the rudiments of music and a commentary on the rules in the form of a dialogue between a master and scholar. In addition to these six tune books, Billings published many individual pieces.

Although Billings published unaccompa-

nied choral music, he favored the use of wind instruments and organ when available. He wrote a few pieces for unspecified instruments. In the choral music instruments may reinforce lines, especially the bass line. Woodwind ensembles can play introductions and interludes. Appropriate instruments would be clarinets, bass viols, and organ.<sup>15</sup>

The music of William Billings was included in collections until 1820, and sung in country choirs throughout the nineteenth century. But because urban musicians and music educators in the nineteenth century looked to Europe for their music, they found Billings’ music, with its modal harmonies and parallel intervals, crude and simple. Musical tastes are often cyclical, however, and at the end of the twentieth century, as we listen to music of many centuries and many cultures, we can once again appreciate the refreshing sound of Billings’ harmonies.

William Billings is important because he was, in a sense, America’s first professional composer, although his living was certainly supplemented by his publications and teaching, in addition to his non-musical jobs. A self-taught musician, he published six popular tunebooks and many other individual pieces, exerting a strong influence on the development of church music in New England in the eighteenth century. His tunebooks, with detailed theoretical introductions, were important materials for teaching music in churches and singing schools throughout the nineteenth century.

## Notes

1. Hans Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents* (Detroit: Information Coordinates, 1976), 15, 25-26, and *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (1986), s.v. “Billings, William” by Karl Kroeger.

2. David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth Century Composer* (Princeton University Press, 1975), 104, 157-60.

3. *The Complete Works of William Billings*, ed. Hans Nathan and Karl Kroeger (Boston: The American Musicological Society and the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-1990), 4 vols. Vol. I includes *The New-England Psalm Singer* (1770); Vol. II, *The Singing Master's Assistant* (1778) and *Music in Miniature* (1779); vol. III, *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (1781), *The Suffolk Harmony* (1786) and the occasional publications; and vol. IV, *The Continental Harmony* (1794).

4. *Sacred Choral Music in Print*, eds. Gary S. Eslinger and F. Mark Daugherty (Philadelphia: Musidata, 1985), 2nd edition.

5. McKay and Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*; James Murray Barbour, *The Church Music of William Billings* (East Lansing, Michigan: State University Press, 1960); Nathan, *William Billings, Data and Documents* (Detroit: Information Coordinates, 1976); and Karl Kroeger, *Catalog of the Musical Works of William Billings* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

6. Carl E. Lindstrom, "William Billings and His Times," *The Musical Quarterly* 25 (1939): 479-97; Richard Crawford and David P. McKay, "The Performance of William Billings' Music," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 21, no. 4 (Winter 1973): 318-30; Karl Kroeger, "William Billings," *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (1986), 1: 215-219; and Rose Dwiggins Daniels, "William Billings: Teacher, Innovator, Patriot," *Music Educators Journal* 74, no. 9 (May 1988): 22-25.

7. Allen Perdue Britton, "Theoretical Introductions in American Tune-Books to 1800" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1949) and "The How and Why of Teaching Singing Schools in Eighteenth Century America," *Council for Research in Music Education* 99 (Winter 1989): 23-41. Britton and Irving Lowens, *American Sacred Music Imprints 1698-1810: A Bibliography* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1990).

8. Alan C. Buechner, *Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1760-1800* (Ph.D. diss.,

Harvard University, 1959); and *The New England Harmony: A Collection of Early American Choral Music*, notes by Alan C. Buechner (Folkways Records FA 2377, 1964).

9. Britton and Lowens, *American Sacred Music Imprints*, 25.

10. *The Complete Works of William Billings*, vol. II, p. 25.

11. A "set-piece" is a through-composed setting of a sacred metrical text.

12. As quoted in Britton and Lowens, *American Sacred Music Imprints*, 181.

13. As quoted Ibid., 177.

14. For more details on copyright see McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, 221-30.

15. For more details on instruments, see Crawford and McKay, "The Performance of William Billings' Music," 328-30 and listen to the recordings on *The New England Harmony*.

