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Sojourn In The South — Billings Among The Shape-Noters

By Raymond C. Hamrick

Macon, Georgia

History tells us that in the early 19th century, a tide of European musical influences poured into the fledgling

New England Colonies, bringing the music of the Yankee Tunesmiths into disfavor and leading to its eventual disappearance there. In the usual course of events, this music would have existed only in old musty books, to be dug out now and then for a nostalgic moment. In truth, that did take place — but only in New England. I personally feel that the appearance of shape-notes from 1798 on was probably the main factor in insuring the safe retreat of early American religious music to other areas more likely to appreciate it.

First, the Midwest (via the *Missouri Harmony*¹) where it eventually lost out, and then to the Southeast, where European influence was long in arriving and had little dissemination outside the cultural centers. These centers were the port cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, and the like. The Southern population was mostly the small farmer and his family, of En-

glish, Scots, Irish and German descent — all inherently musical people with a strong feeling for folk music.

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Into this mold was poured the rejected music of the Yankee Tune-smith, that music being taken — via shape-notes — into the tunebooks of the Southern compilers, i.e., Ananias Davisson's *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), the several Tennessee books, William Walker's *Southern Harmony* (1835) in South Carolina, followed closely by B.F. White's *Sacred Harp* of Georgia (1844), and its several revisions into the 1990s. Thus was this music brought into the life of the Southern Rural.

It was accepted in part into the religious services. Most major denominations still have many *Sacred Harp* tunes in their hymnals. The Primitive Baptists, who use the *Lloyds Hymnal* in their services, gleaned most of their tunes from this source. I was raised in a Primitive Baptist home and grew up very familiar with these tunes. The historical background caught my interest, and an early meeting with George Pullen Jackson² solidified that interest.

I noticed very early that while the "Southern Folkstyle" was by far the most popular in the *Sacred Harp*, the music bearing the name of William Billings seemed to command a

Raymond Hamrick has been involved in shape-note (Sacred Harp) music for many years, and has written articles on different aspects of the Sacred Harp performance characteristics.

higher level of attention from the singers. His pieces were used mainly when the class was composed of the best singers and leaders. Where the tunes of other New England composers such as Read, Swan, Holden, et al, were used frequently and with a casual ease, those of Billings were approached with much closer attention. It was recognized that his music was, shall we say, "different."

Billings's music, I think, had two special qualities that insured it a "special" place. Charles Atkins says:

His music was aimed at the man at the plow and the woman at the loom. He wanted everyone to sing and enjoy it. His music appealed to primitive emotions. However, it was not the highly trained, sophisticated musicians he was interested in. He wanted the singing to be the natural out pouring of the common man and woman.

From an article by Richard Crawford and David McKay: "The main influence behind Billings' music seemed to be declamation and the momentum that metrical declamation can generate. There is evidence that Billings sought in his performances to generate momentum through strict maintenance of tempo."³ Anyone who has attended shape-note singings will recognize these qualities as basic performance characteristics.

Did Billings's style help mold these characteristics or did it fit naturally into a pre-existing environment? Regardless, the union was permanent. In the 1991 *Sacred Harp* revision, the previous Billings tunes — ASSURANCE, EASTER ANTHEM, ROSE OF SHARON, BEAR CREEK, PETERSBURG, FUNERAL ANTHEM, PHOEBUS, VERMONT, DAVID'S LAMENTATION, MAJESTY, CHESTER, BENEFICENCE — were joined by AFRICA and JORDAN, making a total of fourteen — a sizeable contribution, bearing clear witness that Billings found a home in the South.

It is an interesting thought that the music of America's first religious composer should have been born, and flourished, in Colonial America, withered and become extinct in its native habitat, then retreated to the South to be welcomed and nurtured for nearly 200 years, then emerged to a far greater popularity that is not only national but now international. Billings's music is sung in Canada,

and we recently mailed 50 copies of the *Sacred Harp* to London — at their request.

We in the Southern shape-note tradition take great pride in having served as the preservers of this uniquely American Musical tradition.

Notes

1. Ed. Allen D. Carden. First published in 1820, *The Missouri Harmony* had been revised 17 times by 1857, and was the most popular tunebook in the Midwest. (Harry Eskew and James C. Downey, "Shape-Note Hymnody," *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, (London and New York: Macmillan, 1986), 4:202.

2. George Pullen Jackson (1874-1953). Scholar and educator of folksong. European-educated, he published *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* in 1933.

3. Richard Crawford and David McKay, "The Performance of William Billings' Music," *The Journal of Research in Music Education*, XXI (1973), 327.

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