



Title: William Billings: Early American Music Educator

Author(s): Rose D. Daniels

Source: Daniels, R. D. (1996, Spring). William Billings: Early American music educator. *The Quarterly*, 7(1), pp. 12-15. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(7), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

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William Billings: Early American Music Educator

By Rose D. Daniels

Eastern Kentucky University

The work of William Billings as a music educator grew out of a need that existed in America during the early to mid-1700s — a need to improve congregational singing in the churches. This was particularly evident in New England, where the atmosphere had been dominated by a Calvinistic tradition that considered music to be a distraction from the sacred texts of the psalms. By the early eighteenth century, scarcely more than a half-dozen hymn tunes were used for all of the psalm texts that were sung, and these had deteriorated to a point where they were barely recognizable (Tellstrom, 1971, p. 13). The practice of lining out, which developed to help overcome these difficulties (a leader singing one line at a time, which would then be repeated by the congregation), met with limited success for only a short period of time. Congregational singing was described by Cotton Mather (Puritan clergyman and writer) in 1721 as “an odd noise” (Mark and Gary, 1991, p. 63) and by the Reverend Thomas Walter in 1721 as “bad beyond expression” (MacDougall, 1940, p. 127). Inaccuracy was not the only problem; the congregation had begun to drag the tempo of the psalms to a point difficult to imagine. This is apparent from the comment of one Puritan preacher who admitted to having “twice in one note

paused to take a breath” (Tellstrom, p. 14).

Ministers who desired to improve the quality of music in their churches began to hold singing classes for the members of their congregations, and thus laid the groundwork for the establishment of a formal system of music education for the masses, i.e. music education as we know it today. The singing classes came to be known as “singing schools.” Although the aim of these schools remained to improve congregational singing, the singing school soon became independent of the clergy and began to be taught by singing masters.

Singing school teachers, or singing masters, were essentially self-taught musicians who worked at other occupations during the day and held singing classes in the evening. The singing school normally functioned as a private venture, with teachers organizing, advertising, and administering their own classes, for which they collected modest fees from each of the participants. The classes would meet for a specified period of several weeks, usually ending with a public concert or “exhibition” (referred to as a “singing lecture” if the minister graced the occasion with a sermon or address on music). As the popularity of singing schools grew, the demand for teachers became so great that one teacher had to serve several communities. Thus, the itinerant singing master came into being, moving from one community to another.

Billings became a leading participant in this endeavor in 1769, when he and John Barry (a singer and choir director, from whom Billings is believed to have had musical instruction sometime during his youth)

Rose D. Daniels is Assistant Professor of Music at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research interests include music in early childhood, sight-reading in high school chorus, and music education history.

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opened a singing school at the Old South Meeting House in Boston — the first of many such schools to be conducted by Billings. The advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* read: “John Barrey & William Billings Begs [sic] Leave to inform the Publick, that they propose to open a Singing School THIS NIGHT, near the Old South Meeting-House, where any Person inclined to learn to Sing may be attended upon at said School with Fidelity and Dispatch” (Mark and Gary, 1992, p.85). Although Billings was a life-long resident of Boston, teaching in such fashionable churches as the First Church and Stone Chapel, evidence exists that he also taught in the neighboring towns of Wymouth, Stoughton and Providence, Rhode Island (Nathan, 1976).

An advertisement that appeared in *The Providence Gazette* on May 28, 1774 provides a clue as to the content of the singing classes taught by Billings: “SINGING SCHOOL. WILLIAM BILLINGS informs the Public, that he proposes to teach the art of Psalmody, in all its Branches...” Therefore, the teaching of singing was directly applied to the singing of psalmody; a term which at the time, according to Hans Nathan, included the singing of psalm-tunes, hymn-tunes, anthems, and occasionally secular pieces (1976). Nathan further states that being a “teacher of Psalmody” also involved “all the preparatory steps leading to performances, which, in singing-schools, were entirely informal and without an audience” (p. 27).

This leads to the question of methodology used by Billings and the other singing masters to teach music reading and singing of psalmody. Since singing school teachers

lacked formal musical training, not to mention teacher training, they were left to their own devices in terms of pedagogical techniques. Necessity is the mother of invention; thus the personal initiative of these singing masters led them to devise some ingenious teaching techniques. These included an adaptation of the *Fasola* system that had been brought to this country from England by the early settlers (a four-syllable solmization of the scale — *fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi*; “see the sidebar to Karl Kroeger’s article in this issue”) and the shaped-note system introduced by singing school teachers William Smith and William Little in their book, *The Easy Instructor*. (Their system involved notes in four shapes, one for each of the four syllables — *fa, sol, la, and mi*.) It is believed that students were not allowed to sing the words to the pieces until the syllables had been mastered (Kingman, 1979).

In the area of rhythm, evidence of Billings’s pedagogical inventiveness is found. In order to achieve exact tempi, homemade pendulums of a specified length were used. The following directions for making them are given by Billings in the introduction to his *Continental Harmony* (1794):

Make a pendulum of common thread well waxed, and instead of a bullet take a piece of heavy wood turned perfectly round, about the bigness of a pullet’s egg, and rub them [sic] over, either with chalk, paint, or white-wash, so that they may be seen plainly by candle-light (as quoted in Kingman, p. 129).

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ingenuity that was found among singing school teachers and the success of singing schools in general, what evidence do we have of Billings's unique effectiveness and popularity as a music educator? Consider the following:

(1) LONGEVITY. There is evidence that Billings was active as a singing-school teacher through 1786; and at least one source indicates that he continued his activities as a successful singing teacher until very near the end of his life (Thayer, 1847, p. 43). As late as 1798, Billings still listed his occupation in the Boston city directory as a "singing master." This is impressive, since singing school teachers were dependent upon obtaining enough students who were willing and able to pay for classes.

(2) EMPLOYMENT STATUS. While most singing-school masters were totally self-employed and self-administered, Billings was often employed by churches which organized classes and paid at least a portion of the fee for his services. The following quotation, dated March 9, 1779, appears in *The Diary of Williams Bentley D.D.*: "Please to pay Mr. William Billings on Order One Hundred & Fifty pounds it being in full for two Months teaching the Youth of the Old South Society the Art of Psalmody which Charge to the Account of Cash Collected for that Purpose." In his account of the 1770s, the Reverend William Bentley wrote that Billings "had the direction of all the music of our Churches" (Nathan, p. 27 — from the entry of September 28, 1800 in *The Diary of William Bentley D.D.*)

(3) AUTHOR OF TEACHING MATERIALS. Experiencing first-hand the need for more and better psalm tunes to use as teaching

materials combined with his creative genius led Billings to produce several volumes of original psalms, the first being printed less than one year after he taught his first singing school. These collections contributed significantly to the singing school movement, and led Billings to become known as Boston's leading psalmist (Kingman, 1979).

How do we account for Billings's effectiveness as a music educator? It was not the result of formal training, since he was a product of common-school education, was a tanner by trade, and his knowledge of music was obtained primarily (if not totally) through reading and observation and perhaps through his own attendance of an early singing school. He does not seem to have excelled as a singer; in fact, his voice was described by contemporaries as rough, harsh, and loud. He was not an accomplished instrumentalist, partially, it has been speculated, because of his physical deformities. He was not blessed with elegance or polish, described in an obituary written by the Reverend William Bentley as:

...a singular man, of moderate size, short of one leg, with one eye, without an address & with an uncommon negligence of person...He died poor & neglected & perhaps did too much neglect himself (Bentley, as quoted in Hamm, 1983).

More recent accounts also indicate that Billings was slovenly in appearance and lacking in the social graces, a description which is perhaps understated based on the following account:

Billings was somewhat deformed in person...with a mind as eccentric as his person was deformed. To say nothing of the deformity of his habits, suffice it to say, he had a propensity for taking snuff that may seem almost incredible, when in these days those that use it are not very much disposed

to expose the article. He used to carry it in his coat pocket, which was made of leather; and every few minutes, instead of taking it in the usual manner, with thumb and finger, would take out a handful and snuff it from between his thumb and clenched fist. (Gould, 1853, p. 148).

It has been said that he accentuated, rather than masked, his physical deformities through his dress and behavior (McKay and Crawford, 1975).

It was, apparently, the unique combination of personal qualities — his eccentricities, if you will — that gave William Billings his appeal and made him an effective communicator. He has been described by various writers as “energetic,” “colorful,” “striking,” “salty,” “full of drive and ambition,” “possessed by the Spirit of Music” (Macdougall p. 49), and “a brilliant if headstrong and lovable wanderer from the straight and narrow way” (p. 61). He was an effective administrator and an excellent self-promoter (Nathan, 1976).

It appears that the success of William Billings as a music educator lay less in his knowledge of music and more in his ability as a leader, a motivator, and a disciplinarian — qualities which are necessary to the success of any music educator. What Billings brought to his compositional style has been aptly summarized as a “vigorous temper and immense musical vitality” (MacDougall, p. 62). Based on all available information, it seems safe to assume that this same temperament and vitality contributed to his success as a music teacher. Even apart from his musical ability, William Billings has earned a place of substantial significance in the history of American music education.

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