

# *A Historian's Introduction to Early American Music*

RICHARD CRAWFORD

MUSIC IS NOT a subject that many scholars of the past have taken seriously, unless they happen to be musicologists—specialists in the art of music.<sup>1</sup> As a musicologist interested in early American music, however, I believe that if more American historians were to consider music as a potential source, both history and musicology would stand to benefit. Indeed, my essay is intended as an invitation, and I offer a few suggestions about how historians might make fuller use of the musical resources that lie close at hand. In presenting these comments I take my lead from the historical profession itself. It is my impression that scholars of the past are increasingly open to new suggestions, new materials, and new perspectives. Ingenious

This paper is a thoroughly revised version of a talk presented on April 18, 1979, at the Semiannual Meeting of the Society, held at The Newberry Library, Chicago. I am grateful to two University of Michigan colleagues, Judith Becker, of the School of Music, and David Hollinger, of the Department of History, for several helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> That music seems to be held in low estate by historians is dramatized by Sydney E. Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), winner of the National Book Award. In a book of more than 1,100 pages Professor Ahlstrom's index lists only three pages devoted to singing, an integral part of the public worship of almost all American religious denominations. I take this condition less as a failure on Professor Ahlstrom's part than as a signal that music is an exotic field for most historians. However, such works as Kenneth Silverman's *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York: Crowell, 1976), Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Frank R. Rossiter's *Charles Ives and His America* (New York: Liveright, 1975), and Carl Schorske's 'Explosion in the Garden' from his *Fin de Siècle Vienna* (New York: Knopf, 1979)—which I consulted in manuscript through the kindness of David Hollinger—were written by non-musicologists who have made themselves at home with music and musical data. Also, Oscar Handlin's *Truth in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 245–49, offers a helpful statement on American historians' treatment of music.

new methodologies, a growing interest in the daily lives of common people, and a strong revisionist tendency in historiography today seem to mark history as a field seeking to expand its range and to illuminate levels of past experience perhaps once thought beyond reach. It seems reasonable to imagine that, given this climate, historians might be ready to seek to learn about early American life through their ears as well as their eyes.

It is not surprising that music is usually considered a subject for musical specialists, a subject standing outside general historical inquiry. Nor does it seem strange that students of the American past—be they historians, literary scholars, or general antiquarians—have not been drawn to study early American music. Here are four rather obvious reasons:

1) Music is considered by many to be more a God-given talent than a field of academic study. People who consider themselves untalented in music, who have no particular feeling for it, are unlikely to have any impulse to study it.

2) The bibliography of music is large, but little writing on music is directed at historians' concerns. Musicologists have generally, and perhaps quite properly, addressed their studies to other musicians. Typically, we musicologists make editions that establish musical texts, and we study performance problems and traditions. Even musical biography tends to be of only minor interest to the general historically minded reader because the musicologist usually sets his subject in a musical-artistic context rather than a social-historical one.<sup>2</sup>

3) Even if historians *wanted* to study music, they would be likely to find some difficulty of access to it. The chief documents of music, after all, are musical scores, which set up a barrier for

<sup>2</sup> Some sense of the state of the art in musicology over the past two decades can be gained from the following, listed here in chronological order: Frank Ll. Harrison, Mantle Hood, and Claude V. Palisca, *Musicology*, Princeton Studies in Humanistic Scholarship in America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); Barry S. Brook, Edward O. D. Downes, and Sherman Van Solkema, eds., *Perspectives in Musicology* (New York: Norton, 1972); and Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology 1936-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

those who do not know how to read musical notation.<sup>3</sup> Phonograph records now make music available to anyone with playback equipment, but the traditions and training of historians have not yet come to establish the sound recording or the phonograph as a part of the historian's survival equipment.<sup>4</sup>

4) The general educated view of music has tended to center on composers and works that are heard in the concert hall. Since little of the music played and sung and composed by early Americans ever finds its way into the concert hall, early American music tends to be overlooked or held in low esteem by arbiters of musical taste. As long as musicians make no case for it on artistic grounds, historians can hardly be expected to step forward as its advocates—especially if they are in no good position to hear or study it.<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons, and for others as well, music has gone unconsidered by most students of the past. Historians have been more readily inclined to bring the literary and visual arts into their field of interest than they have the art of music, further confirming the traditional primacy of sight over sound in the historical imagination.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Of all the myths that surround music none is more false than the belief among those who do not read music that those who do possess superior artistic insight. In and of itself, musical literacy is a relatively simple skill that can be mastered by a child. Many have learned to read music without experiencing a corresponding aesthetic enlightenment.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most impressive musical achievements of the American Revolution bicentennial celebration was the creation of New World Records by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. By the end of 1978 the company had produced 100 long-playing recordings of American music, and sets of all 100 were donated to universities, colleges, schools, and other cultural organizations throughout the world. Parts of the set are also being sold commercially. The editorial committee that supervised the project included a historian, Prof. Warren Susman of Rutgers University. Each recording was accompanied by extensive notes, including a bibliography and a discography, of interest to social and cultural historians. A list of the recordings and information about their availability can be obtained from New World Records, 231 East 51st Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Crawford, *American Studies and American Musicology* (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1975), offers some suggestions about the place of American music in American musicology.

<sup>6</sup> A recent example is Michael Kammen's 'From Liberty to Prosperity: Reflections upon the Role of Revolutionary Iconography in National Tradition,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86(1976):237-72.

The obvious difficulties notwithstanding, I propose that music can fit comfortably into the historian's purview. The development of music parallels the development of society; the events of music history show many of the traits that can be observed on the surface of any society at any given time. Moreover, beyond the standard chronicle of events, the scholar who is looking for such things can find in music evidence of deeper cultural processes at work—patterns of change and stability that seem to direct, or at least help to explain, the procession of events. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, music can recreate and reflect aspects of human experience that no other agent can touch. Thus, on three levels—on the surface level of events, on the underlying level of cultural patterns, and on the even less accessible level of personal experience—music offers the promise of enlivening the historical landscape, of contributing to knowledge and understanding about the 'world we have lost'<sup>7</sup>—a world to which my colleagues in the historical enterprise devote the best of their life's energies.

Taking 'early American music' to mean music made in the English-speaking colonies and states before 1801, the first thing that historians ought to know about it is that a lot of playing and singing, and even a fair amount of composing, went on during the nearly two centuries that followed the arrival of the first English colonists. Here is a series of landmark dates identifying important events in the progress of the art of music in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America:

1640. The first book in the English-speaking American colonies is published: 'The Bay Psalm Book,' a metrical version of the Old Testament Book of Psalms, compiled by a group of New England ministers to provide psalms faithful to the biblical text for singing in public worship.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is the title of Peter Laslett's book on England before the industrial age (2nd ed., New York: Scribner's, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> A facsimile reprint of the first edition, with annotations by Wilberforce Eames, is currently available (New York: Artemis Books, n.d.). Zoltan Haraszti's *The Enigma*

1698. The ninth edition of 'The Bay Psalm Book' appears with tunes, the first printing of music in the colonies. (Earlier editions had omitted the tunes, referring the user to English tunebooks; from the time of the publication of the ninth edition, the psalm tunes were available from American presses.<sup>9</sup>)

1720. Controversy breaks out in Boston and neighboring towns over psalm-singing in public worship. Reformers complain that congregations sing badly, and they propose singing 'by rule' or 'regular singing' to improve and standardize the practice of psalmody. Singing-schools are formed to try to teach the new way. Many people resist the reform, and bitter struggles are fought in some congregations over singing.<sup>10</sup>

1729. The first known public concert in the colonies is given in Boston. It is most likely put on by musicians from England, and the program surely consists of European pieces.<sup>11</sup>

---

of *The Bay Psalm Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) provides commentary on the text. Virginia Lucile Davis, 'The 1651 Revision of The Bay Psalm Book,' M.A. thesis, Kent State University, 1976, stresses that the revision, not the original, was the work that enjoyed such wide circulation in the years that followed. Irving Lowens's 'The Bay Psalm Book in 17th-Century New England,' chap. 2 of Lowens's *Music and Musicians in Early America* (New York: Norton, 1964), provides a good brief treatment of the topic.

<sup>9</sup> See Richard G. Appel, *The Music of the Bay Psalm Book, 9th Edition (1698)* (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1975), for the tunes and commentary on them.

<sup>10</sup> The classic account of the controversy about singing is George Hood, *A History of Music in New England* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, & Co., 1846; repr. New York: Johnson, 1970, with a new introduction by Johannes Riedel). Later accounts of more than routine interest include Henry Wilder Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940; repr. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1961), esp. pp. 95-110 and 383-86; Allen P. Britton, 'Theoretical Introductions in American Tune-Books to 1800' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1949), pp. 75-108; Robert Stevenson, *Protestant Church Music in America* (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 21-31; and David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 3-29. References to the controversy are sprinkled throughout *Sibley's Biographies of Harvard Graduates*. Historians such as John Kouwenhoven and Ola Elizabeth Winslow long ago recognized that early American singing controversies were a topic of more than purely musical interest. See Kouwenhoven, 'Some Unfamiliar Aspects of Singing in New England (1620-1810),' *New England Quarterly* 6 (Sept. 1933): 567-88; also Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill, 1630-1783* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), chap. 10.

<sup>11</sup> The first known concert was advertised in the *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 2, 1729, as 'a Consort of Musick performed on sundry Instruments, at the Dancing School in King-Street.' The reference is found in Cynthia Adams Hoover, 'Music in Public Places,' forthcoming in *Music in Colonial Massachusetts*, to be published by the Colonial Society

1735. The earliest known opera performance in America is given in Charleston, South Carolina. The work is *Flora*, an English ballad opera.<sup>12</sup>

1761. James Lyon's *Urania*, a collection of sacred music, is published in Philadelphia; it contains six tunes marked as new, the earliest instance of identified new compositions published by an American composer.<sup>13</sup>

1770. In Boston, William Billings publishes *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, a collection of 126 of his own sacred pieces, with a frontispiece by Paul Revere. Billings thus becomes the first American composer to issue a whole collection of his own music.<sup>14</sup>

1780s. The establishment of a music trade begins—specifically, a group of music publishers (as opposed to book publishers who issue collections of music), music sellers, instrument makers, and dealers in musical supplies. The trade is centered in the cities of the eastern seaboard, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Baltimore.<sup>15</sup>

---

of Massachusetts and consulted in galley proofs through the kindness of Barbara Lambert. Oscar G. Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life in America (1731-1800)* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907; repr. New York: Musurgia, 1949), compiled chiefly from eighteenth-century newspapers, is a goldmine of information on the subject.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar G. Sonneck, *Early Opera in America* (New York: Schirmer, 1915; repr. New York: Blom, 1963) remains the classic account. For detail on the backgrounds of the repertory see Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Lyon's work has been reprinted in facsimile with an introduction by Richard Crawford (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974). Oscar G. Sonneck's *Francis Hopkinson and James Lyon* (Washington: H. L. McQueen, 1905; repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1967, with a new introduction by Richard Crawford) provides biographical information on Lyon and describes his tunebook in detail.

<sup>14</sup> Billings's career is covered in McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*. Hans Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), is also useful. Billings's music is discussed in J. Murray Barbour, *The Church Music of William Billings* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1972). *The Complete Works of William Billings*, ed. Hans Nathan and Karl Kroeger (n.p.: American Musicological Society and Colonial Society of Massachusetts, distributed by the University Press of Virginia, 1977-), the first scholarly edition of any American composer's complete works, is in progress, with vol. II available and vol. I in press at this writing.

<sup>15</sup> Music printing is the subject of Richard J. Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing: A History of Music Publishing in America from 1787 to 1825 with*

1790s. A movement to reform sacred music is touched off, in which certain musicians denounce the supposedly crude style of the music composed by Americans and propose a turn toward European harmonic and melodic practice. Their message is heeded in some quarters and ignored in others.<sup>16</sup>

1800. By this time the large American cities of the eastern seaboard have established theaters, including companies that regularly produce musical entertainments on stage. Substantial numbers of European musicians (especially Englishmen or Germans via London) have settled here, effectively making the eastern seaboard cities musical colonies of Europe, and specifically of England.<sup>17</sup>

The survey of events set out here reflects the general progressive trend of civilization in the colonies. The burgeoning of population, the growth of cities, and the simultaneous increase of wealth and leisure time, which helped to spark interest in the visual arts and in science, also helped to stimulate and

---

*Commentary on Earlier and Later Practices* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), consulted in manuscript through the author's kindness. Christine Merrick Ayars, *Contributions to the Art of Music in America by the Music Industries of Boston, 1640 to 1936* (New York: Wilson, 1937; repr. New York: Johnson, 1969) and Virginia Larkin Redway, *Music Directory of Early New York City* (New York: New York Public Library, 1941) provide useful information on the music trades in these locales. Notes by Cynthia Adams Hoover for 'Music of the Federal Era,' New World Records, NW 299, describe the musical instruments of the period. Vinson C. Bushnell, 'Daniel Read of New Haven (1757-1836): The Man and His Musical Activities' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1978) has a great deal of data on music publishing; see especially pp. 203-14. See also Karl Kroeger, 'Isaiah Thomas as a Music Publisher,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 86(1976):321-41. Although not discussed here, a grass roots tradition of instrumental music also grew up around the military. See Raoul F. Camus, *Military Music of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed study of the career of Andrew Law, one of the principal American reformers, see Richard Crawford, *Andrew Law, American Psalmist* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). See also Paul R. Osterhout, 'Music in Northampton, Massachusetts to 1820' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978), esp. chap. 3.

<sup>17</sup> John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music*, 4th ed. (New York: Crowell, 1965), is especially rich in biographical information on the European musicians who settled here. See also Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life*, and Sonneck, *Early Opera*. My notes for 'Music of the Federal Era,' New World Records, NW 299, contain additional interpretation and bibliography on the subject.

shape the development of music. As time passed, American society grew more secularized, more diversified—trends reflected in our bird's-eye view of musical events. Moreover, as more Americans begin to compose, the issue of cultural identity—the question of what is characteristically American as opposed to European in style—surfaces in music in the 1790s and proves to be the focus of artistic and religious controversy in succeeding decades.

Even as Americans' interest in the secular world increased, sacred music occupied an important place, and it was in churches and meetinghouses that much of the most significant music-making in early America went on. In sacred music, in fact, Americans first showed signs of breaking away from their colonial status. Although the psalmody practiced on these shores in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sprang from British roots,<sup>18</sup> and although it continued to be nourished by musicians and musical publications brought from the mother country, Americans, especially New Englanders, increasingly directed the destiny of their sacred music. The versification and printing of a metrical psalter of their own (1640), the printing of psalm tunes (1698), the reform of congregational singing (1720 and later), and especially the advent of home-grown American composers of sacred music (1760s and later) all mark steps in the transformation of an imported English musical tradition into an Anglo-American one.

In secular music, colonial status remained somewhat longer. Most of the folksongs and dance music that were passed on by oral tradition in the colonies can be traced to British antecedents. The same was true for so-called 'popular' music—especially the songs that circulated in broadsides, newspapers, and song-

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Temperley's *The Music of the English Parish Church*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), just off the press at this writing, describes the British antecedents of American practice.



sters.<sup>19</sup> Almost all the tunes to which these songs were sung came from Britain, even though Americans were forever setting new verses to them. Similarly, in the more formal kinds of secular music, public concerts remained until well into the nineteenth century chiefly the province of European musicians in this country, as did operas and other theatrical performances. One important change, however, was that after the American Revolution secular performers were more likely to be European musicians who settled here rather than transient Europeans.<sup>20</sup> The immigrant professionals who stayed were chiefly responsible for setting up a specialized music trade (1780s), for establishing musical theaters in the cities of the Atlantic coast (by 1800), and for creating an artistic climate that helped to spark the reform of American sacred music that occurred early in the 1790s.

The events of early American musical history, readily accessible in numerous primary and secondary sources, unfold in a shape roughly parallel to the events that make up the standard general historical chronicle. Historians who are inclined to examine the facts of music history will surely find much there to interest them: a 'new' range of data that can enrich their perspective on the American past.

If the events of early American musical life invite study from a historical rather than an exclusively musical viewpoint, some of the processes that underlie the flow of events are likely to be of special interest to the historian. If, as my reading leads me to believe, historians are especially interested in identifying and describing underlying cultural patterns—for example, institu-

<sup>19</sup> Important recent studies on these repertoires include Irving Lowens, *A Bibliography of Songsters Printed in America before 1821* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1976), Gillian Anderson, *Freedom's Voice in Poetry and Song* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1977), and the forthcoming *National Tune Index*, compiled by Carolyn Rabson and Kate Van Winkle Keller, to be published in microfiche by University Music Editions.

<sup>20</sup> See Maurer Maurer, "The 'Professor of Musick' in Colonial America," *Musical Quarterly* 18(1950):511-24.

tional structures that shape cultural activities, or forces promoting stability or change—then America's early musical life offers many possibilities for such interpretations. Perhaps it would be helpful here to suggest a few such patterns or processes.

### *Institutions and Financial Support*

The general survey of early American musical life offered above concentrates less on the creation of musical works than on the development of institutions and the means for supporting and encouraging organized music-making. Folk music is not mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Sacred music, on the other hand, gains attention not only because it was widely sung, but because it grew from and was supported by religious institutions. The nature of that support bears examination.

To begin with, many of the Protestant sects that settled in America opposed elaborate sacred music on religious grounds, believing that congregations should make their own music, free of professional leadership.<sup>22</sup> The most widespread indigenous tradition of sacred music of the eighteenth century was that of the Congregational and Presbyterian denominations. Like other matters, musical issues among these groups seem to have been controlled by vote of the town meeting or the religious society, rather than by the musicians themselves. Since the congregation made the music in public worship, decisions on music-making affected everyone. Thus it is not surprising that musical issues often sparked controversy. Whether to sing

<sup>21</sup> Although folk music plays little role in this account, certain twentieth-century songs and instrumental pieces of oral tradition surely date back to the eighteenth. For a useful general bibliography of American folk music—and of all American music, for that matter—see David Horn, *The Literature of American Music* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977), an annotated bibliography. See Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (paperback ed., New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1978), esp. chaps. 1 and 2, for a statement of how one noted ethnomusicological anthropologist has interpreted the world's folksongs.

<sup>22</sup> Percy A. Scholes, *The Puritans and Music in England and New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), describes the social and religious background of music-making by Anglo-American dissenters. For more on the American attitude, see my notes to 'Make a Joyful Noise: Mainstreams and Backwaters of American Psalmody,' New World Records, NW 255.

from one version of the Psalms or another; whether to change the congregation's style of singing or leave it alone; whether to sponsor a singing-school for members of the congregation; whether to let the best singers sit together and form a choir; whether to admit instruments into meeting to accompany the singing: these were the burning issues of sacred music-making in the Calvinist churches.<sup>23</sup> To enumerate these issues is to focus on the values of early American sacred music. A high priority was placed on participation, on a 'democratic' respect for the wishes of the majority of the congregation; a relatively low priority was placed on musical training and skill and on the sensuous splendor of the sound of music.

In keeping with these values, the level of musical training fostered by the churches was elementary. Singing-schools, sometimes privately run and sometimes church-sponsored, initiated Americans to the rudiments of music, but they seldom went further, and those who wished to develop their singing skill in psalmody beyond that level were more or less left to their own devices.<sup>24</sup> Not given to ostentation in such matters, American Calvinists neither encouraged a vigorous pursuit of musical technique nor were they inclined to spend much money to support sacred music-making. Psalters and tunebooks seem generally to have been private property, not bought by the church for its members.<sup>25</sup> Occasionally, toward the end of the

<sup>23</sup> Taking the bibliography of New England town histories in Alan C. Buechner, 'Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1760-1800' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1960), as a starting place, I have gone through more than 200 such works. Most have some mention of singing in the meetinghouses, and the issues noted here are the ones that were most likely to cause controversy at the time. Michael Zuckerman's *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1970), with its rich treatment of the notion of 'consensus,' is helpful for the understanding of debates about singing.

<sup>24</sup> Buechner, 'Yankee Singing Schools,' remains the most complete and authoritative source on the organization and achievements of early American singing schools.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton Andrew Hill, *History of the Old South Church Boston, 1669-1884* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1890), p. 39, records a congregational decision in 1758 to enlist subscribers for the Reverend Thomas Prince's revision of the Bay Psalm Book. The action specifies 'That the Subscribers and others be desir'd to furnish themselves with the Psalm-Books,' and recommends that those 'not able to purchase them' be supplied by the subscribers as well. No church funds were expended.

century, a congregation would earmark a small sum for a musical instrument—most frequently a ‘bass viol’ to accompany the singing;<sup>26</sup> but such expenditures were rare.

The organization of secular musical life in early America, in contrast to that of sacred music, seems to have fallen almost entirely to musicians. Typically, secular musicians earned a living by teaching and performing. The teaching of sacred music was usually group instruction carried on by a singing-master; secular music was more likely to be taught privately. Whether the pupil was learning to sing or to play an instrument—perhaps violin, German flute, harpsichord, or guitar—the emphasis in such instruction was on learning music as an art. Teachers of secular music were most likely to be centered in cities, where the population and wealth were concentrated, and their clientele was most likely to reside among the affluent, who had leisure time to spend, who could afford instruments, and who were willing to pay a teacher to aid their efforts to make music. Among the fashionable, European music-masters seem to have enjoyed special vogue, both as teachers and performers.<sup>27</sup> From the 1730s on, professional musicians—some itinerants and some settlers in the cities—appeared before the public in concerts. Most were Europeans. Many seem to have been their own sponsors. Renting a hall, putting out advertisements, planning a program calculated to draw and please an audience, the musicians themselves were at risk in this kind of an enterprise. Their livelihood depended upon their earnings, their earnings upon admissions. Later on in the century, concert series supported by subscription were held in some cities like

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Cutter, *History of the Town of Arlington, Massachusetts* (Boston: D. Clapp & Son, 1880) p. 109, reports that in 1796 the precinct subscribed money ‘for the purpose of purchasing a bass viol. In the following year (1797) a suitable place was built in the meeting-house to keep the bass-viol.’

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Jefferson and Francis Hopkinson were two such ‘gentleman amateurs,’ as Gilbert Chase notes in his *America’s Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955); see esp. chap. 5, pp. 84–105. See also Helen Cripe, *Thomas Jefferson and Music* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), and Sonneck, *Francis Hopkinson and James Lyon. Silverman, Cultural History of the American Revolution*, is informative on secular musical life in America between 1764 and 1789.

New York and Philadelphia. Yet, such series, which lessened the financial risks, were the exception rather than the rule. Many of the same procedures that governed concert life and private music teaching applied to the musical theaters as well. Most were founded by musicians or stage people and were kept running chiefly through their efforts.<sup>28</sup>

An especially striking condition in eighteenth-century American musical life, sacred and secular alike, is that the primary financial support for music-making was generated chiefly by musicians themselves, working singly or in groups. That situation stands in sharp contrast to the situation in Europe, where musical patronage flowed from the aristocratic courts and the church, the richest and most powerful institutions in the culture. Both courts and churches trained and supported composers and performers, who in turn supplied music to enhance their sponsors' splendor. In the American colonies, no real court-life existed, and, although an occasional colonial governor or wealthy planter was devoted to music,<sup>29</sup> no dynastic tradition of support for musicians appeared within the families of such men. As for the churches, nothing resembling the support in Europe by the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches of a core of highly skilled musicians ever took root on these shores until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> In

<sup>28</sup> Sonneck, *Early Concert-Life*, is the best source for detailed accounts of concert-giving activities. Taken together with his *Early Opera*, it shows that concert and theater music were supplied by many of the same musicians, who also performed at the pleasure gardens that opened up in the larger American cities. See Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: Norton, 1979), chap. 1.

<sup>29</sup> David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), dealing with another provincial society, describes musical life in Scottish 'great houses,' esp. pp. 25-28. Perhaps the closest American equivalent is documented in *Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal and Letters 1767-1774*, ed. John Rogers Williams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1900), which records the experience of Fithian as tutor in the Carter family of Nomini Hall in rural Virginia, who carried on a vigorous musical life.

<sup>30</sup> Britton, 'Theoretical Introductions,' pp. 46ff., cites W. L. Woodfill, 'Music in English Social History, c. 1535 - c. 1640' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1940), for information on the training of musicians in England. Robert Stevenson, *Music in Mexico* (New York: Crowell, 1952), shows how rigorously a Roman Catholic country like Spain supervised the musical colonization of the New World. See especially chap.

Europe patronage of music was built into the structure of society's highest echelons, filtering down to foster the efforts of composers, performers, and teachers. In America, support for music was built up slowly and painfully, as the list of landmark events suggests, beginning at the grass roots level.

My first hypothesis, then, is that organized music-making in America, from its very beginnings, was carried on at quite a distance from the chief sources of cultural power and wealth. Surely that fact has had a powerful effect on its subsequent development in this country. One of the most eminent historians of music in the United States, in fact, has concluded that the most characteristic and 'important' American contributions to the art have come in vernacular or popular idioms rather than in the more formal genres of concert music.<sup>31</sup> While some might want to debate that conclusion, there can be little doubt that the development of music as an art is affected by the kind of institutional support it receives and that support for music in early America generally sprang from institutions that were themselves unstable and marginal.

### *Sacred Music and Oral Tradition*

Historians and musicologists have long been aware of the controversies over singing in eighteenth-century New England meetinghouses. For many musicologists, debates about congregational singing have seemed to be primarily musical matters. Generally, musicologists have seen the debates as centering on musical literacy—on musical notation, its function in a community musical practice like psalmody, and the questions

---

2, 'The Transplanting of European Musical Culture.' Henry Raynor, *A Social History of Music from the Middle Ages to Beethoven* (paperback ed., New York: Taplinger, 1978) is full of information about the support of music-making. See chap. 13, 'Churches, Cantors, and Choirs,' for a helpful discussion of the German Lutheran approach.

<sup>31</sup> Chase, *America's Music*, pp. xviii–xix.

of whether and how eighteenth-century American congregations could be taught to read music.<sup>32</sup>

More recently, these musical controversies have begun to be interpreted in a broader context. It seems clear now, for example, that the controversies about singing need to be considered not just as musical issues but also as religious ones. To people who experienced the world, as did many American colonists, as a sacred phenomenon in Mircea Eliade's sense, any proposal for change in their customary practices of worship would be considered very carefully before being adopted. New Englanders fought about sacred music not just because music was important to them, but because it was a part of their religious rituals, and thus lay at the very center of their lives. Sacred music was thus set apart from the rest of music; its repertory and practice were not subject to the natural kind of evolution found in secular music.<sup>33</sup>

Early American musical controversies also stand as symptoms of social as well as religious change. As Ross W. Beales has recently noted, debates about congregational singing go far beyond music, touching on issues involving the New England social order. How was seating in the meetinghouse to be arranged, for example? (Were the singers to be allowed to sit together, thereby upsetting the hierarchical seating arrangement because of a trifle like musical skill?) More generally, were the worship traditions of the older generation to be successfully challenged by members of the younger? These are some of the issues that underlay debates about singing in pub-

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Lowens, *Music and Musicians*, pp. 39-40; see also H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 5-7; McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, pp. 9-20.

<sup>33</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), illuminates the deep differences between the way religious and irreligious man perceives the world. Eliade writes: 'Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real' (p. 202). Those who find Eliade's work on the nature of religion helpful might also want to consult anthropological perspectives in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), esp. chaps. 2 and 4.

lic worship. Recognizing and identifying them as social issues rather than merely musical ones help to explain why the conflicts at times grew so bitter.<sup>34</sup>

Among the many elements that come to light in the controversies over sacred singing, there is one more that has not been emphasized in earlier accounts. That element is verbal literacy: the ability to read words in a certain way and at a certain pace. Perhaps a look at the backgrounds of metrical psalmody as it was practiced in America will help to focus this issue.

When the English Protestants in the sixteenth century set the Old Testament Book of Psalms into verse, they successfully created sacred 'ballads' for the people.<sup>35</sup> Sternhold and Hopkins's 'Old Version' went through more than 600 editions between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. It stands at the beginning of a tradition of metrical psalms that have been sung by British and American congregations ever since. American clergymen contributed 'The Bay Psalm Book' (1640), also called 'the New England Version,' to this tradition, and when it went out of fashion in the eighteenth century it was replaced in congregations by Brady and Tate's *New Version of the Psalms of David*<sup>36</sup> or the increasingly popular *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* by Isaac Watts.<sup>37</sup> From midcentury as well, as New Testament hymns came into favor they were added to the psalmbooks.

Metrical psalms and hymns represented a literary effort.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Professor Beales for sharing his unpublished work with me and for helpful suggestions he has made in the course of conversations.

<sup>35</sup> See John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, 2nd rev. ed., with new suppl. (London: Murray, 1907; repr. New York: Dover, 1957), pp. 857ff.

<sup>36</sup> See Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology*, pp. 799ff.

<sup>37</sup> For a perceptive treatment of hymns from a literary point of view, see Martha Winburn England and John Sparrow, *Hymns Unbidden* (New York: New York Public Library, 1966), esp. 'The First Wesley Hymn Book,' pp. 31-42, and 'Emily Dickinson and Isaac Watts,' pp. 113-48. Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (New York: George H. Doran, 1915; repr. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), is the classic account of Anglo-American hymnody by a musically knowledgeable observer; Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*, can also be recommended. See also my 'Watts for Singing: Metrical Poetry in American Sacred Tunebooks, 1761-1785,' *Early American Literature* 11:(1976):139-46.



Their translations and verses were made by learned men and published in psalm- and hymnbooks whose small format made them both portable and cheap. That they circulated widely is shown by Evans's *American Bibliography*, which lists more than 250 American issues of metrical psalms alone before 1801.<sup>38</sup>

Yet even though metrical psalms and hymns were set down in print, their performance relied heavily on oral tradition. That was especially true of the musical part of psalmody, for most psalm- and hymnbooks printed in America carried only texts without tunes. Through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was generally assumed that congregations knew the psalm tunes by heart. When psalm- and hymnbooks did include tunes, they were generally optional additions, purchased separately and tipped in at the back of the book, dramatizing their separateness from the texts. The standard meters of psalmody were limited to three or four, and the same tune could and did serve for the singing of many different texts in the same meter. Thus, although the psalm and hymn tunes were set down in print and were widely available in that form, most of the Americans of the period who sang them had learned them orally rather than from notation.

Some of the same can also be said of the texts. Even though wide publication and advancing literacy made the printed texts available to far more Americans than could read the tunes in musical notation, many Americans learned their sacred texts orally as well. The Protestants of the Reformation who first translated the Psalms and set them in verse had done so because they wanted to foster a participating, singing congregation. Surely aware that many believers could not read, the early English Protestants seem to have been determined that illiter-

<sup>38</sup> See Charles Evans, *American Bibliography*, 14 vols. (Chicago: privately printed; and Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1903-59); see also Clifford K. Shipton and James E. Mooney, *National Index of American Imprints through 1800: The Short-Title Evans* (Worcester and Barre, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1969).

acy should not disqualify people from taking part. Thus they chose traditional balladry as their model; that is, they cast their translations in the familiar meters of secular ballads. They followed familiar rhyme schemes and they set their texts to simple, unadorned tunes of generally modest range. From the practical standpoint, the ballad model was an inspired choice. Not only was it familiar to all, it embodied a network of implication, a system of coaching the participant even if he or she lacked access to a book, or read too slowly to keep pace with the singing, or could not read at all. Note, for example, the structure and the assonance of the first stanza of Isaac Watts's version of Psalm 90, which in the King James Bible is translated as 'Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.'

Our God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.<sup>39</sup>

Whatever judgments one might have on the aesthetic qualities of the two versions, Watts's is better suited to stick in the memory and to guide the path of the text's unfolding. The worshiper who sings Watts's translation is launched on a journey shaped by formula. The text proceeds for eight more stanzas, each in exactly the same form: four-line units alternating lines of eight and six syllables. Moreover, once the first two lines are sung, the worshiper knows the sounds of the final word of the third and fourth because of the rhyme scheme. It is as if a prompter stands at the singer's elbow, throwing out cues about what is to come.

Metrical psalms were well suited to circulation among the unlettered by way of prompting or memorizing, but they did not always depend upon these means. In many congregations where books were in short supply or people lacked the skill to read them, the more formalized practice of lining-out was

<sup>39</sup> Quoted here from Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David* (Exeter: C. Norris, 1815), p. 166.

adopted. Lining-out called for a leader to intone or read the text line by line, with the congregation singing back the lines in alternation with the reader.<sup>40</sup> As more and more Americans came to be literate, and as new notions of proper psalm-singing were advanced by clerical and musical reformers, opposition to lining-out grew. For opponents, 'praising God by Peace-meal'<sup>41</sup> was unseemly. Yet, lining-out persisted in many locales through the eighteenth century and beyond. A New England proponent, writing in 1780, explained the practical appeal of lining-out: 'I, and more than three quarters of a large congregation are deprived of bearing a part in that solemn Worship . . . all for want of having the Psalm read line by line. . . . It is impossible for all to get books; and if all had books, they could not all be benefitted by them, some being old and dim-sighted, others young and not versed enough in reading to keep pace while singing.'<sup>42</sup>

Psalmody in early America, then, is a written tradition practiced widely as an oral tradition, and it promises to repay close study from that perspective. Sources for such study do exist. The written practice is preserved in hymnbooks and tunebooks from the period. The oral practice, though more ephemeral and fragmentary, is by no means irrecoverable. An idea of its workings can be constructed from a range of sources, including: 1) the hymnbooks and tunebooks preserving the written tradition;<sup>43</sup> 2) descriptions of the oral practice by contemporaries;<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*, pp. 374–82 for a brief and helpful perspective on lining-out. See also McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, p. 13n., for another interpretation and more bibliography.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted from Boston, *New-England Courant*, Feb. 17/24, 1724.

<sup>42</sup> Ezra Barker to Solomon Warriner, Jr., Wilbraham, Massachusetts, Aug. 8, 1780; quoted here from a manuscript owned by Ross W. Beales, Jr., to whom I am indebted for calling it to my attention. As late as 1840, a reliable author wrote: 'To this day, [lining-out] prevails over three-fourths of the territory of the United States.' See Hood, *History of Music in New England*, p. 200.

<sup>43</sup> Donald L. Hixon, *Music in Early America: A Bibliography of Music in Evans* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1970), provides access to these titles, almost all of which are available in Microprint in the American Antiquarian Society–Readex Microprint Corporation's Early American Imprints series.

<sup>44</sup> Some such accounts are accessible in printed form. An annotated list of printed pamphlets and sermons on sacred music in Britton, 'Theoretical Introductions,' pp. 442–71, is a helpful guide.

3) contemporaneous documents touching on both written and oral practices, including town and church records, letters and diaries, singing lectures, and other miscellaneous materials;<sup>45</sup> 4) twentieth-century recordings of oral sacred music;<sup>46</sup> 5) secondary works of historians, anthropologists, musicologists, and others who have studied and analyzed oral traditions.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps further research will confirm the hypothesis suggested here: that Protestant psalmody was never intended to be a purely written tradition but was designed instead to be flexible, that is, accessible to written and oral practice alike. If that is true, then perhaps lining-out ought to be considered less a corruption of the original practice than as a natural concomitant of it. Viewed as an issue of literacy, it might be best to say that, even without lining-out, metrical psalmody exemplifies a written tradition designed to transcend writing. As such, it can be seen as a kind of way station between literacy and illiteracy—a forcible reminder that literacy is not an absolute state, like pregnancy, but rather a continuum. The literacy of an educated urban dweller, dependent on reading for much of his experience of the world, might stand at one end of the continuum. That of the rural yeoman, able to sign his name and to read ‘slowly but with general comprehension,’ might stand near the other.<sup>48</sup> In between, and even beyond the yeoman,

<sup>45</sup> The bibliography of Buechner, ‘Yankee Singing Schools,’ could be a good starting point for getting at this wide and heterogeneous range of materials.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, ‘The Gospel Ship: Baptist Hymns & White Spirituals from the Southern Mountains,’ New World Records, NW 294; also see vol. 1 of ‘Folk Music in America,’ Library of Congress LBC 1, which has a good example of lining-out on side 1, band 3.

<sup>47</sup> Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), presents an authoritative account of oral tradition among the epic poets of Yugoslavia. Charles Seeger’s ‘Oral Tradition in Music,’ in *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1949), is a brief, penetrating introduction to theoretical aspects of the topic.

<sup>48</sup> The quotation from H. Schuman, A. Inkeles, and D. Smith, ‘Some Social Psychological Effects and Non-Effects of Literacy in a New Nation,’ *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 16, no. 1 (1967), appears in Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 137, n. 44. Lockridge’s book is full of helpful insights about the nature and effects of literacy.

other levels existed. The history and development of psalm-singing in eighteenth-century America, if studied from the perspective of literacy, could help to illuminate some dark corners of the issue. At the very least, such a study could help to reveal the complex functions that printed matter filled in early America. For those accustomed to thinking of books and printed matter as serving similar roles in all cultures, it would surely be fruitful to reassess that position in light of psalmody, where the psalmbook is not only an authority and a script for the learned, but a prompter and a support for the rest.

### *Music in the Country and the City*

One of the axioms of historical analysis is that life in the city differs markedly from life in the village or countryside. Historians have sought to describe and document some of these differences in early America. Carl Bridenbaugh's studies of colonial American cities make a good case that a whole different cultural outlook prevailed there than in the countryside—a 'mental gulf,' he calls the gap. For Bridenbaugh, colonial American cities—'centers of the transit of civilization from Old World to New'—are better understood as remote suburbs of London than as the edge of a separate American civilization.<sup>49</sup> Sam Bass Warner has noted that the diversity and high density of population in colonial Philadelphia threw all sorts of people together in the same living space: 'The Proprietors, the merchants, and the doctors shared the narrow compass of the Middle Ward with such ungentle occupations as laborer, porter, carter, skinner, watchman, crier, paver, grazier, and even goat-keeper.' 'Though dangerous to health,' Warner writes, 'the eighteenth-century pattern of settlement guaranteed every cit-

<sup>49</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1955). The 'mental gulf' statement is on p. 135 and the other quotation on p. 481. For the latter point see pp. 134, 297, 481.

izen a knowledge of town life.<sup>50</sup> Jackson Turner Main has analyzed early America as encompassing four different types of society: the frontier, the subsistence farming community, the commercial farming community, and the city. Working from an economic basis, Main shows that, among other factors, the way in which wealth was distributed in each type of society shaped patterns of experience peculiar to each. Of the four, cities enjoyed the highest concentration of wealth, and the opportunities that wealth generated helped to give city life a greater mobility which helped in turn to distinguish it from life in other areas.<sup>51</sup>

It is a demonstrable fact that musical life in early American cities differed markedly from that of village and countryside. Some of the reasons are sociological. Concert and theatrical music could flourish only in the cities because in eighteenth-century America concerts and theatrical performances were commercial activities, and only in the cities could there be found enough people with sufficient leisure to support such endeavors. Therefore, it was to the cities that our first musical immigrants came—at first merely a trickle of Englishmen, but later an increasing flow, which picked up especially after the American and French revolutions broke out. The immigrant musicians who came to American shores in the latter part of the eighteenth century may not have been Europe's best, but many were competent performers, and some were composers as well. Trained as youngsters in Europe, they came to Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Charleston, and New York, carrying their musical traditions with them. Many worked as teachers, giving lessons to would-be keyboard players, violinists, and singers. Some entered musical commerce as publishers or music sellers. Some played organ in Anglican or Roman Catho-

<sup>50</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 16-17.

<sup>51</sup> Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). See esp. chap. 1, pp. 7ff.

lic churches. Most also participated in concerts. From these various activities—teaching, performing, and offering other musical services—they put together a modest living. Most of all, in the latter part of the eighteenth century they decisively marked the United States as a musical colony of Europe by establishing their training, their compositional models, and their musical institutions as the standard. As suggested above, the most decisive event in the Europeanization of American urban music was the founding of musical theaters in major American cities. By the late 1790s each of the larger seaboard cities had established some sort of musical theater, based especially on the models of the London stage; that is, plays with spoken dialogue and interpolated songs. The theater was the first institution established on this side of the Atlantic that provided steady employment for professional musicians. The kinds of skills and experience that were needed in the theater—composing and arranging, and generally feeling at home in a world that dealt in illusion—were ones that only European musicians were likely to have. Thus, from its establishment until well into the nineteenth century, the American musical theater was dominated by Europeans. They formed a kind of subculture, entering into various kinds of cooperative agreements and partnerships, thus setting up an informal urban musical network that American-born musicians were not really able to penetrate.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, concerts and musical theater did not represent the whole of urban musical life in early America. Less formal, less commercial kinds of music-making went on in the cities too, just as they did elsewhere. Dance tunes, ballads in oral tradition, songs that appeared in broadsides and newspapers, and sacred pieces in tunebooks circulated in town and country alike. Nevertheless, theatrical and concert performances gave the cities an added layer of musical activity that, for economic rea-

<sup>52</sup> See my notes for 'Music of the Federal Era,' NW 299, for more on the subject.

sons, could not be exported into the countryside. It was that layer—presenting music to entertain a passive and paying audience, setting a premium on novelty and variety, introducing a new level of performance skill, fostering the notion of musical taste and discrimination—that brought a new complexity to urban American musical life, in effect ‘modernizing’ it in line with what was thought to be European fashion.<sup>53</sup>

If European professionals stood at the cutting edge of urban music-making in early America, quite a different situation existed in the towns and villages where most Americans lived. There, the most highly organized musical activity was likely to be in sacred music. From the 1760s on, in cities and towns all over New England, a new musical ensemble was being formed: the volunteer choir.<sup>54</sup> Selected presumably from the best and most enthusiastic singers in a congregation, choirs began to make their mark in the years following the Revolution. Earning the right to sit together in public worship, choirs expanded their repertory to include not just the simple congregational psalm tunes, but also brighter, more elaborate pieces, such as fusing-tunes, with contrapuntal play, and even large-scale anthems.

The emergence of the choir as the dominant musical force in

<sup>53</sup> For a general statement of ‘The Concept of Modernization,’ see Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600–1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), chap. 1. Urban concert and theatrical music-making represented the most sophisticated and advanced musical traditions being practiced on this side of the Atlantic during the eighteenth century. Or at least that statement is true if one discounts the Moravians who settled in Pennsylvania and North Carolina and carried on a musical life of considerable sophistication and high artistic level. However, the Moravians lived in closed settlements governed according to their religious beliefs, and their music-making is closely bound up with their special idea of community. Because their influence seems not to have extended very far beyond the borders of their own settlements, they are not considered here as belonging to the prevailing climate of early American musical life. The Moravian Music Foundation in Winston-Salem, N.C., distributes publications dealing with Moravian music, including a periodical, *Moravian Music Foundation Bulletin*, available free of charge and very useful. Donald McCorkle and Hans T. David are two scholars whose writings on Moravian music are especially noteworthy.

<sup>54</sup> Buechner, ‘Yankee Singing Schools,’ chap. 4, deals with the formation of choirs; a table dating the establishment of choirs in various communities can be found on p. 268.



the meetinghouse was opposed by many. Some congregations stopped singing altogether, giving up music entirely to the choir. Some complained that the choir's selections were too sprightly, better suited to secular activity than to worship. In some places choir members succeeded in offending other members of the congregation by their behavior, which seemed to imply a sense of social superiority. By the end of the century some choirs had succeeded in introducing instruments into the sanctuary to accompany their selections. All of these developments, and others as well, struck some as sacrilegious. Although nominally agents of sacred music, choirs seemed to many New Englanders to be prone to setting purely musical concerns ahead of religious ones.<sup>55</sup>

It may seem both procrustean and untidy to characterize urban music as the creature of the European immigrant professional and the music of the countryside as the creature of the volunteer choir. On the one hand, separating the two into neatly wrapped packages smacks of oversimplification; on the other, it is perhaps wistful to suggest that the one tradition was led by trained musicians and the other by 'the people.' Organized music-making of any kind depends upon leadership, and small-town choirs did not burst spontaneously to fruition without musical leaders—singing-masters—to instruct and inspire them. The point to be made here, however, goes beyond the

<sup>55</sup> One of the most interesting anti-choir blasts appeared first in the *Boston Newsletter* and then in the *Portsmouth New-Hampshire Gazette* on Jan. 13, 1764. Calling the members of an unidentified choir a self-appointed 'set of Geniuses, who stick themselves up in a Gallery, and seem to think that they have a Priviledge of engrossing all the singing to themselves,' the letter accuses them of favoring 'light, airy, jiggish Tune[s], better adapted to a Country Dance,' than to public worship. Those who criticize the choir's choice of music, the writer continues, are met with 'a smile of Pity for [their] want of Taste.' Moreover, he concludes, 'they are so much taken up in beating Time, and endeavouring to execute the Fuges . . . properly, that the Matter of the Psalm has very little Share in their Attention.' Quoted here from Bushnell, 'Daniel Read,' pp. 34-35.

The issue of organs in early American meetinghouses was a hot one among Calvinists. See McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, pp. 249-54. See also Orpha Ochse, *The History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), esp. pp. 9-98. The issue of other instruments in church needs a great deal more close study. For a quick note see McKay and Crawford, *William Billings*, p. 255 & n.

issue of leadership. It lies rather in the relationship of the leader to his public and in the activity of the latter. The characteristic structure of the urban musical scene tended to center on the consumer of music, while that of the rural and small-town scene focused more upon the participant. In the cities, the professionals made a living by perceiving and defining a market and then supplying it with diverting entertainments, feats of virtuosity, emblems of good taste and cultivation, old songs and new, sheet-music publications, and, for part of their clientele, music lessons. In the countryside a widespread and growing impulse to sing polyphonic sacred music was the primary force that animated organized musical life. Sparking that impulse if necessary, fostering it where it could be found through instructional singing-schools, and helping to manage and provide music for the choirs formed by the singing scholars—these were the primary tasks of the non-urban American musician in the eighteenth century. To be successful a city musician had to be something of an entrepreneur as well as an accomplished artist; the outstanding musicians of the countryside played a role closer to that of artisan-schoolmaster.

The musical tradition that flourished in American villages and the countryside from the 1760s on centered on psalms and hymns set for unaccompanied four-voice chorus. Originally circulated through English tunebooks, the imitable style of English parish psalmody was taken as a model by Americans who by the 1770s were actively composing their own sacred pieces and publishing them in tunebooks that served as textbooks for the instructional singing-schools. Untutored in the ways of orthodox English composition and harmony, these American composers settled on an idiom distinctly their own. Their sacred pieces made their way swiftly into printed tunebooks, taking their place alongside the English favorites that the choirs were singing. From the 1770s on, the psalmody of the American countryside was a dynamic tradition, its repertory growing rapidly. The musicians most responsible for its flourishing

state were, figuratively, the men next door: William Billings, Boston tanner; Daniel Read, New Haven storekeeper and combmaker; Timothy Swan, Suffield hatter; Supply Belcher, Farmington tavern-keeper; and dozens of others who, gifted with the ability to make tunes and harmonize them, did so unselfconsciously and thereby enriched the religious and artistic lives of their neighbors and anyone else in a position to get hold of a tunebook and raise a tune from it.<sup>56</sup> By the 1790s, when a reform movement sparked by certain musicians and clergy had called the quality of the Americans' compositions into question, the psalm tunes, fusing-tunes, and anthems by Americans had established themselves so firmly in singing-schools, musical societies, and village choirs, that the reform had little effect in the countryside.<sup>57</sup>

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the functions of musical creation, performance, and consumption have generally been considered separate in Western musical culture, with the first assigned to the composer, the second to the performer, the third to the listener. Foremost in the hierarchy is the composer, whose sonic inventions determine what is played and heard. Next stands the performer, the middleman, through whose efforts the composer's directions are transformed into sound. Third comes the listener who receives the composer's message through the performer's efforts. It is characteristic of this para-

<sup>56</sup> For more on the general character of early American sacred musical life see my notes to 'The Birth of Liberty: Music of the American Revolution,' *New World Records*, NW 276. See also my article, 'American Music around 1776,' *Musical Newsletter* 6(Spring 1976): esp. 4-8, and my notes for 'Make a Joyful Noise,' NW 255.

<sup>57</sup> The movement to reform American sacred music is touched on in many parts of Lowens, *Music and Musicians*; see esp. chaps. 6, 7, 8. Andrew Law's role in the process is described in Crawford, *Andrew Law*. The American repertory took hold in the West and South as the frontier moved westward. Lowens's identification of the Harrisburg publisher John Wyeth as a conduit through which New England pieces were introduced in the West and South has been especially helpful. The establishment of a related tradition in the Deep South in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is covered in George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933; repr. New York: Dover, 1965), and more recently in Buell E. Cobb, Jr., *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

digm that both the composer and the performer are specialists whose rigorous training and consuming artistic commitment separate them from their listeners, who outnumber them by far. The listener, essential only because the composer and the performer need an audience, is entirely governed by what composer and performer do. He may be pleased, entertained, shocked, alienated, or moved to tears, but his role is essentially a passive one.

The music of eighteenth-century American cities followed this paradigm quite closely, with composers and performers, born and trained in a foreign environment, bringing their talents to the newly leisured consumers of the eastern seaboard. The music of the eighteenth-century American countryside shows a different set of relationships. The composer is no professional exotic but a neighbor, trained in singing-school, most likely a singing-master himself, making tunes for recreation but probably making his living at some standard trade or craft. The music he composes is to be sung by other neighbors, perhaps in the choir as part of public worship, but also in singing-schools for instruction and elsewhere for recreation too. No intimidating barrier separates composer and performer. Moreover, psalmody is written for the most fundamental of musical instruments, the human voice. As choral music, it is composed to invite participation rather than passive consumption, and therefore the gap between creator, performer, and consumer is further narrowed. American psalmody of the late eighteenth century is rooted in a musical culture which, albeit limited and surely provincial, displays a social wholeness, with creators and participants sharing the same background. It is an art that, though perhaps modest in artifice, draws considerable cultural power from its accessibility, its social and religious usefulness.

By what measure does early American sacred music qualify as a music of the countryside? Sacred tunebooks were printed in cities like Philadelphia and Boston, were they not? And was

not William Billings a native Bostonian and a lifetime resident of that city? The answer to these last two questions is yes. But several facts about American sacred music help to demonstrate it to be an art whose creative roots lie not in the cities but rather in the villages and countryside.

First, between 1698 and 1810 more than 350 issues of sacred music were printed in the English-speaking American colonies. There are in these works approximately 7,500 compositions, roughly two-thirds of which were attributed to composers born in America. Approximately 230 American composers are named. Of that number fewer than half can be positively traced (100 of 230, or about forty-three percent).<sup>58</sup> Of the hundred composers who can be traced, however, all but a tiny handful were born and grew up in towns and villages of southern and central New England.<sup>59</sup> All save one, in fact, were natives of small towns in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The large number of composers indicates that the impulse was strong among eighteenth-century Americans to try their hand at composing, unhampered by doubts about their lack of formal training. It also suggests that, since a high proportion of American psalmody hailed from small towns in Connecticut and Massachusetts, an atmosphere fostering sacred composition was established in these communities and not in others. (The single important exception to the rule that Yankee composers were small-town folks is William Billings, a native and lifetime resi-

<sup>58</sup> The statistics are taken from my forthcoming bibliography of printed American sacred music, 1698–1810, written in collaboration with Allen P. Britton and Irving Lowens, and scheduled for publication by the American Antiquarian Society; also from an unpublished index of the whole repertory that I have compiled.

<sup>59</sup> The exceptions are Elisha West, born in North Yarmouth, Me.; Stephen Jenks, who seems to have been born in Rhode Island, though he lived from early childhood in Connecticut; James Lyon, a Newark, N.J., native; William Smith, who seems to have come from Hopewell, N.J.; and Francis Hopkinson, a Philadelphian. The importance of Connecticut psalmody is noted in my 'Connecticut Sacred Music Imprints, 1778–1810,' *Notes* 26 (Mar. and June 1971):671–79; the prominence of small-town composers and biographical information about many of them appears in my 'Massachusetts Musicians and the Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody,' forthcoming in *Music in Colonial Massachusetts*, to be published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts.

dent of Boston, the most famous and probably the most talented of the lot.)

A second observation reinforces the first. The 350 or so sacred publications that appeared in America between 1698 and 1810 were the work of 140 compilers—editors who chose the contents, wrote the introduction, and supervised the publication of the tunebook. Of that number 19 were immigrants, 10 more may have been, and the rest were native Americans. Of the 111 born in America, only 4 can be traced to larger cities.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, even though many sacred collections were printed in the cities, most of their authors were natives and residents of small towns, mostly in New England. It appears that many such works were printed in cities only because the presses were located there. Thus, despite urban imprints, most were generated by and intended for a small-town market.

One final point that helps to mark the disjunction between the musical life of city and country in early America is the form in which the music of each circulated, and the relative cost of each. The music trade of the cities peddled its characteristic secular music in sheet-music format: a sheet of folio size, generally folded once, reproduced a song (a vocal melody with text accompanied by a written-out keyboard part) or music for keyboard. The presence of a keyboard instrument is itself a sign of affluence, for harpsichords and pianofortes were surely not in the eighteenth century within the financial means of any substantial number of Americans. Nor was sheet music cheap. Most songs and keyboard pieces covered two pages. Thus, at a standard cost of 12½ cents per page, a typical piece of sheet

<sup>60</sup> The four are Billings and an obscure figure named Jonathan Badger of Boston, Francis Hopkinson of Philadelphia (signer of the Declaration of Independence, and, more actively involved in secular than in sacred music-making for most of his life), and Isaiah Thomas, who, although born in Boston, lived most of his life in the town of Worcester. Karl D. Kroeger, 'The Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony and Sacred Music in America 1786-1803' (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1976), provides a detailed account of Thomas's work as a music publisher, focused on his most successful collection.

music sold for a quarter of a dollar.<sup>61</sup> Sacred music was a different matter. Circulating in tunebooks bound in boards to endure for years and containing dozens of compositions, the sacred repertory was offered to the public as a commodity both permanent and relatively inexpensive. Karl Kroeger has shown, in fact, that some of the collections from Isaiah Thomas's print shop made tunes available at less than a penny apiece—a far cry from the twenty-five cents that a typical piece of secular music would bring.<sup>62</sup>

The musical practices of city and country in early America were by no means entirely distinct. Repertories overlapped, and the two cultural territories held enough in common that many music-makers could find themselves at home in either. However, biographical and economic facts suggest that musical life in city and country was founded on different structures and patterns of creative energy. They suggest another layer of evidence supporting historians who have sought to illuminate some of the differences in experience of city and country folk in early America.

My third observation, then, and the one that I have been able to pursue the most systematically here, is that early American psalmody is a rarity among Western musics: a fully notated, written practice 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.

Musical events and the patterns they reveal ought to present few problems to the historian; once informed about them, he can treat them more or less as he does any other historical data. However, when it comes to dealing with music itself the histo-

<sup>61</sup> The figure is taken from Wolfe, *Early American Music Engraving and Printing*, consulted in manuscript.

<sup>62</sup> Kroeger, 'The Worcester Collection,' pp. 73–75.

rian may find himself growing uncomfortable. Even if he likes music, listens to it regularly, perhaps even sings or plays, he may have difficulty finding the language to interpret it with anything near the sophistication that he applies to other historical data. Yet the ultimate value of music is found not in the historical information it generates but in its intrinsic nature—in the special kind of experience that it can create. Precisely because music differs from other kinds of activity, an understanding and consideration of pieces of music could help to provide the historian with access to sectors of past experience otherwise lost. Few historians have undertaken such inquiries, perhaps chiefly because they have felt themselves insufficiently schooled in the technical bases of music-making. Is a thorough knowledge of musical technique necessary for such an inquiry? Or is a significant amount of knowledge about pieces of music and how they work and what they tell us available even to people who lack a full understanding of its technical workings? My answer to the latter question is yes, and I shall conclude my paper by citing a few points to support that position.

Perhaps the most obvious property of music is its power to create its own framework for experience, to set it off in a separate sphere. Just as poetry, to a certain degree, heightens a thought and creates a new context for it, so singing a poem stylizes it even further, transforming the way the words are structured and related to each other. Singing a poem slows it down and intensifies its accents, stressing certain words at the expense of others. The slower pace may invite more contemplation of the meaning of the words, or it may obscure verbal meaning since the musical elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm may seduce attention away from the message of the words. Group singing is an especially interesting phenomenon, offering a powerful means of binding people to each other and to a belief in the words they are singing—at least as long as the singing lasts. One needs no technical grasp of music at all to recognize the formidable social bond generated when a group



of people focuses its energy and attention on singing.<sup>63</sup> A group of singers possesses an identity different from a group of non-singers. Its members are participants in a common endeavor, aware of each other in special ways—staying in tune and time, and perhaps seeking to blend voices—temporarily unified by an artistic convention that, even though it holds over them ceases with the last note, unites them in creating a collective experience whose echoes may continue to resonate long after in their individual memories. This is not to make any extravagant claims for the power of music. Rather it is to recognize that singing is so commonplace and fundamental a human act that it is natural to overlook it unless it happens to occur in the service of an artistic masterwork. In pausing to comment upon it here, we are doing no more than noticing that one of life's simplest and most available pleasures, one obviously very much a part of eighteenth-century American life, can also be a social force of some power.

No special knowledge is needed, either, to appreciate another property of music: its ability to intensify the expressive meaning of a text. The Soundsheet that accompanies this issue reproduces a performance of William Billings's *Anthem for Thanksgiving*, the composer's paraphrase of Psalm 148. Here is the text:

O praise the Lord of heaven,  
Praise him in the height, praise him in the depth.  
O praise the Lord of heaven,  
Praise him all ye angels, praise Jehovah.  
Praise him sun and moon and blazing comets,  
Praise the Lord.  
Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
For he spake the word and all were made,  
He commanded and they were created; admire, adore.

<sup>63</sup> See Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture*, pp. 13–16. Lomax writes, 'the convergence of so much formalization and redundancy in the sung communication makes it a potent means of organizing and coordinating group behavior' (p. 14). Further, he notes that in some societies 'the whole of the society (or a large sector of it) vocaliz[es] in unison in one giant harsh voice,' and that formula holds for 'the Protestant church, where all the members of the congregation call out to God together across the infinite' (p. 15).

Ye dragons whose contagious breath  
 People the dark abodes of death,  
 Change your dire hissings into heav'nly songs,  
 And praise your maker with your forked tongues.  
 O praise the Lord of heaven.

Fire, hail and snow, wind and storms,  
 Beasts and cattle, creeping insects, flying fowl,  
 Kings and princes, men and angels,  
 Praise the Lord!  
 Jew and gentile, male and female, bond and free,  
 Earth and heaven, land and water,  
 Praise the Lord!  
 Young men and maids, old men and babes,  
 Praise the Lord!

Join creation, preservation  
 And redemption join in one;  
 No exemption, nor dissention,  
 One invention, and intention  
 Reigns through the whole,  
 To praise the Lord!

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!<sup>64</sup>

The text, essentially a list of creatures and natural phenomena, is a powerful injunction for all to join to praise God in their own way. Billings's musical setting gives to the text a dramatic shape that the words alone can only suggest. First, the call to praise the Lord is given out in half-notes and quarter-notes, organized in stately units of three beats to the measure. After a sprightly and diverting rhythmic flurry depicting the dragons' praise, presumably lisped out through 'forked tongues,' the list of praising agents settles into a kind of steady quarter-note march. Next, Billings increases the momentum by swinging into metrical verse declaimed in eighth-notes ('Join creation,

<sup>64</sup> The anthem appears in William Billings, *The Continental Harmony* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1794; repr. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), with an introduction by Hans Nathan, pp. 35-41. The performance is by The Western Wind Vocal Ensemble, reproduced by permission of the performers and Nonesuch Records from 'Early American Vocal Music,' Nonesuch H-71276. I am grateful to Teresa Sterne of Nonesuch Records for her help in this matter.

preservation . . .'). Now Billings's rhythmic strategy is clear: to superimpose upon the text a pattern of ever-increasing speed. In less than three minutes' time he has moved from a moderately paced gait to a rapid, sweeping motion, as the call to praise the Lord goes out to every corner of the world, and beyond. A climax of sorts has been reached, but Billings is not through yet. He has a final exclamation to deliver: 'Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!' And in delivering it he abandons the form-giving property of the words altogether, causing them to be repeated over and over, to be declaimed syllabically and bent out of shape melismatically—almost as if the firmament itself were ringing with the voices of the assembled throng.

Billings's *Anthem for Thanksgiving* emphasizes a final point about music that gives it its unique power and helps to make it an indispensable resource for studying certain aspects of the past. Music has a special relation to time. Musical notation allows present-day musicians to recreate experiences close to those of the past, transcending the present and making music that sounds more or less like it did then. But it does more than help us to return to the aural experience of the past. Music creates *its own* sense of time. Documents and paintings and objects—the stuff of traditional historical inquiry—exist in space. Music exists in time. When a piece of music begins it establishes a time framework separate from the clock-time in which we normally live; that framework continues until the music stops, and clock-time takes over again. Thus, the ultimate convention of music, its power to measure time according to its own purposes, offers the present-day observer a chance to experience the passing of musical time in somewhat the same way it passed in the composer's day.

Billings's *Anthem for Thanksgiving* makes its impact not just through its expressive treatment of text but also through its time-scale—especially its balancing of the first three-quarters of the piece, dominated by words, with the last quarter, dominated by music. Moreover, the piece creates a sense of progres-

sion and arrival. First the agents of praise are listed; then, singing 'Hallelujah!', they praise the Lord. In the praising itself the anthem reaches its highest point of intensity. It would be fair to say that in the performance recorded here, a *linear* sense of time is achieved—a sense that the piece begins at one point, and by the time it arrives at its conclusion something significant and complete has happened. The time that has elapsed has gone forever. Billings's setting of the word 'Hallelujah!' is not just the end of the anthem, it is its climax.

Not all music of the period treats time in linear fashion. The second side of the Soundsheet reproduces a very different approach to musical time: a dance piece, 'Haste to the Wedding,' performed by a group of hammer-dulcimer players.<sup>65</sup> Many of the differences from the Billings piece are obvious: the amateur quality of the recording (made in the field), the absence of words, the lack of any climax at all, and the fact that 'Haste to the Wedding' was composed not so much to be listened to as to accompany dancing. The fundamental difference that applies here, however, has to do with the piece's approach to time. Comprised of two related sections, each equivalent to a musical sentence (we call such sections 'strains'), the piece is high on repetition and low on contrast. A steady beat prevails throughout. Each strain is played twice, and each leads directly into the other with no strong sense of punctuation. If we were to call the first strain A and the second B, the formal structure of 'Haste to the Wedding' as performed here could be represented as:

A ABBA ABBA ABBA ABB

The entire two-strain piece is played four times. Yet, it could just as well be played twice, or seven times, or a dozen, depending on the circumstances. Its time sense is utterly unlike that of

<sup>65</sup> 'Haste to the Wedding' is an Irish dance tune that circulated in early America. The performance was recorded in the summer of 1976 at an informal session of the Original Dulcimer Players Club, Ewart, Michigan. I am grateful to Eugene Cox of Byron Center, Michigan, for permission to use the recording, and to David Warren Steel of the University of Michigan for making it available to me.

Billings's anthem. The continuousness of the rhythm and the inexorable repetitions of the strains have the effect of releasing even a passive, non-dancing listener into another time world—a *circular* one in which he or she is drawn into a recurring time-cycle rather than a teleologically organized experience of linear time. In the time-world of 'Haste to the Wedding,' time seems hardly to pass at all, and one is likely to finish hearing it with a sense that nothing has changed, that all is as it was before the music began.<sup>66</sup>

Billings's anthem and 'Haste to the Wedding,' with their differing time senses, offer the musicologist—and perhaps even the willing historian—an opportunity to ponder and perhaps even to test the bold thesis advanced by Lewis Rowell:

Music is not only an art that employs or occupies time; I suggest that music is also a model of time and that the rhythm of music gradually comes to reflect cultural ideas on the nature of time. . . . I firmly believe that ideas *do* influence music, and that cultural preferences for such things as linearity, circularity, continuity . . . gradually seep into—or perhaps emerge from—man's rhythmic experience and enter into the systems he constructs to represent and explain this experience.<sup>67</sup>

The notion that music might represent a 'model of time' in a culture should give pause to those who tend to think of it as a pastime rooted in purely aesthetic impulses and hence unrelated to the wellsprings of fundamental human consciousness.

To propose that historians can ignore music only at their peril would be both false and foolish. At the same time, if the historian's business is to learn all he can about the life that men and women have lived, music is a rich field for historical research.

<sup>66</sup> Judith Becker, 'Hindu-Buddhist Time in Javanese Gamelan Music,' scheduled for publication in a forthcoming issue of *The Study of Time* (New York: Springer-Verlag) and consulted in manuscript through the kindness of the author, distinguishes between linear and circular approaches to time in another musical repertory.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis Rowell, 'Time in the Musical Consciousness of Old High Civilizations—East and West,' *The Study of Time*, 3(1976), consulted in typescript. My thanks to Judith Becker who called my attention to this article.

The history of music, in America or anywhere else, is much more than the story of composers and their artistic efforts. It is also the story of people expressing their reactions to the events of their lives, or distilling such reactions into stylized forms by singing and playing musical instruments, just as they worship and govern and fight and die. Discovering how and what they sang and played, and why, enriches the historian's view of the past. Contemplating the special nature of music itself holds out even wider possibilities, for it offers the historian a glimpse of another dimension of human experience.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.