

## Music Blurbs for 4-21-19

### News and Notes

This Sunday, Brass Traditions will join our choir for the Easter festivities. We'll sing all the Easter favorites like "Jesus Christ is risen today," and "The strife is o'er." Choir music will include music by America's first composer, William Billings, as well as the inevitable "Hallelujah!" chorus by Handel.

### Bulletins (10:30 only)

Today's choir anthem is by America's first composer, William Billings (1746-1800). He was born and lived in Boston through the period of the American Revolution. He counted Samuel Adams and Paul Revere as close friends. In fact, Revere designed and engraved the title page of Billings' first collection, *The New England Psalm Singer* (1770). This was the first major collection not only of American music but also by a single American composer.

A tanner by trade, his musical endeavors were mostly self-taught. In his own words: "Nature is the best Dictator, for all the hard, dry, studied rules that ever was prescribed, will not enable any person to form an air (tune)."

Early colonial America was strongly Calvinist and even the Anglican Church had a strong Calvinist streak. The singing of psalms was the only music allowable in church. The psalm texts were written as metered poetry so they could be sung to metered hymn tunes (as opposed to unmetered chants). Singing was done by "lining out." The clerk or warden would sing a line and the congregation would then repeat it. Not only did this make everything twice as long but made the sense of the text rather disjointed. By the mid-eighteenth century there was a lot of dissatisfaction with this "old style" of singing. A movement began with the rise of singing schools, of which Billings became a part.

Singing teachers, like Billings, taught people to read music. Consequently, tune books (*Harmonies*) were printed, some as large as modern hymnals. As more people read music the tune books became more widely used in churches. Not surprisingly, choirs started to appear in churches at this time as well. Early colonial music bore a similarity to music in the Middle Ages because both placed the melody in the tenor line (upper male voice). In Europe, the melody line had already moved to the treble (uppermost voice) a few centuries earlier and where it remains today. After the English Reformation, the English churches ran on two tracks, one of which was a local parish tradition, mostly rural. Not surprisingly, that is the tradition that was brought to the colonies and it seems that keeping the melody in the tenor hadn't changed in rural England

since the 1300s. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Harmonies* moved from New England to the rural South as urban tastes began to reflect contemporaneous European trends. The *Harmonies* became the staple of the style we know as “shape note” singing.

While his music was popular around the time of the Revolution, with the changes in musical taste, later in life he was relegated to being a street sweeper and died in poverty. In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been a renewed interest in his music. Today’s exuberant piece embodies the quirkiness, rhythmic vitality, and straightforward harmony of America’s first composer. In 1970, in recognition of his important place in our musical history, he was inducted in to the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame.