

“The Continental Harmony: Music of Williams Billings”--Gregg Smith Singers (1969)

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Essay by Scotty Gray (guest post)*



Williams Billings

Six years before the 1776 Declaration of Independence, William Billings published the first of his six collections of choral music, the “New England Psalm Singer,” the first tune book given entirely to the works of one American composer. Given the title of this present recording, one could well assume that the pieces come from the sixth of Billings’s collections, the 1794 “The Continental Harmony.” However, only three of the 20 pieces on this recording belong to that collection. Significantly, taken together, the 20 pieces on this recording come from all six of Billings’s collections: “The New-England Psalm-Singer” (1770), “The Singing Master’s Assistant” (1778), “Music in Miniature” (1779), “The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement” (1781), “The Suffolk Harmony” (1786), and “The Continental Harmony” (1794), making this recording a valuable treasure of almost a quarter of a century of early American (Billings’s) music.

William Billings (1746-1800), was a friend of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere, a tanner by trade, a self-taught musician, an itinerant master in the singing-school tradition, which did much to further music reading and singing in early America, a publisher, a conductor, and an indigenous American composer of considerable fame in the mid-1780s. By the end of his life, his fame had declined and he died poor and relatively unknown. The shape-note singing tradition, which he fostered, continued to include his work and later scholars of American folk traditions rediscovered his music.

In the singing-school tradition, Billings’s “The Continental Harmony” included an introduction to the rudiment of music and in his “A Commentary on the preceding Rules; by way of Dialogue, between Master and Scholar,” he makes an intriguing note regarding performance practice:

. . . in general they [the women's and men's parts] are best sung together, viz. if a man sings it [the tenor or melody] as a Medius, and a woman as a Treble, it is in effect as two parts; so likewise, if a man sing a Tenor with a masculine and woman with a feminine voice, the Tenor is as full as two parts, and a tune so sung (although it has but four parts) is in effect the same as six. Such a conjunction of masculine and feminine voices is beyond expression, sweet and ravishing, and is esteemed by all good judges to be vastly preferable to any instrument whatever, framed by human invention.

Billings composed in a variety of forms and types (anthems, fugal tunes, hymn tunes, psalm tunes, carols, and choruses); wrote in a variety of moods from serious to humorous; used a mixture of secular and sacred texts (Old and New Testament scriptures, Tate and Brady psalm paraphrases, English and American hymn texts such as those of Isaac Watts, Joseph Addison, Charles Wesley, John Cennick, and George Whitefield, and his own texts, as well as secular poetry); composed in a variety of styles (sacred, secular, patriotic); and employed a variety of techniques (word painting, dance rhythms, changing meters and rhythms, as well as the imitative writing). There is a basic, fresh madrigalism to much of his writing with its musical depiction of the texts through melodic figures, changes in meter, rhythm, tempo, and, in a sensitive performance, through changes in phrasing and volume. Billings's compositions are known or entitled sometimes by the name of the hymn tune, sometimes by a title, and sometimes by the first line of the text.

Fugal tunes, for which Billings had a special fondness, were a popular style of psalm or hymn tune in rural areas of New England and featured an overlapping of music and text involving imitative or contrapuntal writing. The form was often a homophonic section ending on the tonic followed by the imitative section, which might last only a few notes or be rather extended, and then a repeat of the imitative ("fugal") section.

Among Billings's compositions with sacred texts is the paraphrase of Psalm 11, "The Bird," from the Tate and Brady "New Version." Here we find Billings's typical contrasting fugal sections with melismas and tone painting. Billings's "Kittery" is a fugal tune setting of the "Lord's Prayer" paraphrase from the Tate and Brady 1770 "New Version." In "David's Lamentation" based on 2 Samuel 18, we have a narrative choral work that lends itself to sensitive interpretation, especially by the male voices. Billings's simple, accessible style of early American choral music is heard in "I am the Rose of Sharon," based on the "Song of Songs" (2:1-8; 10-11), which abounds in a variety of tempi, metric shifts, rhythmic vitality, changes of moods, imitation, and word painting. The nativity story in Luke 2 is found in several compositions on this recording such as the Christmas carol (Judea), "A virgin unspotted," with a strophic narrative followed by a lively dance in a quicker tempo. "The Shepherd's Carol" has contrasting sections of duple and triple meter for the text beginning "Me thinks I see a heav'nly host of Angels on the wing, Me thinks I hear their cheerful tones So merrily they sing." Billings crafted his canon, "When Jesus Wept" as a setting of the text based on John 11 and it has remained one of his most enduring compositions. "The Lord is Risen" (Matthew 28:6) is a

jubilant Easter anthem in Billings's typical imitative style and descriptive baroque-style word painting.

"Hopkinton" is a stately rendering of John Cennick's hymn text: "Lo! He cometh! Countless trumpets blow," while "Cobham" is a devotional setting of Isaac Watts's paraphrase of Psalm 39, "Teach me the measure of my days." "Swift as an Indian arrow flies," is taken from Isaac Watts's hymn, "Time, what an empty vapor 'tis! And days, how swift they are! Swift as an Indian arrow flies," based on Proverbs 27:1; Eccles. 12:1, 2 Cor 6:2. Here, again, Billings makes use of the fugal style and word painting. "Creation," based on Watts's paraphrase of Psalm 139, "When I with pleasing wonder stand," is another of Billings's fugal tunes and shows again his fondness for metric shifts and varieties of tempi to convey the meanings of the text.

Billings also set a large number of secular texts, including "Morpheus," which is a slow, quiet, meditative setting of Thomas Flatman's text about the god associated with sleep and dreams. Best known among Billings's secular compositions is his patriotic anthem, "Let tyrants shake their iron rod" ("Chester"), a bit of American history told through early American music. It has been called the "Over There" of the American Revolution and the majestic 4/4 march speaks of how British "Gen'ral[s] [Howe, Burgoyne, Clinton, Cornwallis] yield to beardless Boys." "Be glad then America," another patriotic anthem (a verse anthem with soloists) for fast day, begins in a somber mood with the words, "Mourn, mourn, mourn, mourn Phar'oh and Ahab prevail in our Land" lamenting the conditions in America at the time. Only near the end of this longer piece comes the texts "Be Glad Then America" and "Hallelujah" set to a brighter musical setting and in the "fugal" style so favored by Billings.

Billings also set light-hearted, even humorous texts. "Consonance" is a commentary on choral music and "Jargon" has a long prose description of ludicrous "instruments" necessary "to do this piece justice." "Modern Music" begins with the instructions, "We are met for a concert of modern invention," and Billings's music undergirds the text's explanation of the keys, voices, meters, tempi, and moods of modern (1781) music. The text, the fugal style, and word painting must have delighted late 18th-century New England audiences.

"Connection" is an appropriate inclusion on this recording with its text, "Hail! Sacred Music hail! We offer at thy shrine One perfect round complete in sound, celestial and divine" and the description, "A Canon of 6 in One with a Ground the words by Rev. D. set to Music by Mr. Billings." A 1794 edition of "Continental Harmony" boasted the frontispiece with its four staves forming a circle and the three stanzas of text interlined which is reproduced (modified) as the cover of this album.

The Gregg Smith Singers who performed these selections is a mixed chorus of 16 singers known not only for their performances of works by Billings and other early American composers, but for works by such diverse composers as Heinrich Schütz, Giovanni Gabrieli, Arthur Sullivan, Arnold Schoenberg, William Schuman, Ned Rorem, and Igor Stravinsky. The careful interpretation of Gregg Smith and his singers refocused attention on the fresh early American

style of William Billings's music. Billings's music was, doubtless, never performed in Billings's time with the musical fineness of the Gregg Smith singers with their quality of choral tone, clarity of diction, precision of the rhythms and meters, appropriateness of tempi, shading of dynamics, and balance of voices. It is a tribute to this native, early American composer that his music lends itself to sensitive musical interpretations.

This 1968 Columbia stereo recording (MS 7277) of the Gregg Smith Singers performing 20 pieces from Billings's collections is a significant addition to the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry and a major contribution to the preservation of our early American heritage and culture.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not represent those of the Library of Congress.