The Evolution of American Choral Music:
Roots, Trends, and Composers before the 20th Century

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I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear.

—Walt Whitman
Leaves of Grass[1]

Prologue

Unlike political history, American choral music did not immediately burst forth with significant people and events. Choral music certainly existed in America since the Colonial Period, but it was not until the twentieth century that its impact was significant. The last half of the twentieth century saw an explosion of interest in choral music unprecedented in the history of the country. American choral music came of age on a truly national level, and through the expansion of music education, technology, professional organizations, and available materials, the interest in choral singing escalated dramatically.

It is possible to trace the history of American choral music from its two most basic perspectives:

1. Music that had a functional purpose (sacred)
2. Music created for artistic purposes (secular)

In the early days of America, issues such as food, shelter, and clothing were foremost in the minds of the people. As America became more affluent, the need for greater diversions increased. Music's purposes reached beyond the amateur, and geographical tastes dictated ever-changing styles and requirements.

Of course the true native Americans were American Indians, but their music remained localized. As an oral tradition, preservation through notation was not a major factor. They and their culture became a minority, and, in many regrettable ways, an unfortunate footnote in American music history. For a detailed account of this true American music see Daniel Kingman, *American Music: A Panorama*,[2] and "Native Pioneers" in Gilbert Chase's *American Music*.[3] Their influence on the development of American choral music is negligible, although twentieth-century composers have employed some of its characteristics in selected works.

The veritable seeds of American music can be found in the religious traditions carried to the new world by transplanted Europeans. The settlers came seeking religious freedom, but, in so doing, they helped create a narrowly focused view of choral music, which took many years to nurture and broaden. In a penetrating study, *The Anthem in England and America* by Elwyn A. Wienandt and Robert H. Young, the authors point out:

> Austerity also characterized Puritan religious musical expression. While it is true that Puritans have been unjustly accused of a general negative attitude toward the arts, it nevertheless remains that their practice of church music could be sung in unison without accompaniment, and nothing more.[4]

William Billings, *The New England Psalm-Singer*, frontispiece engraved by Paul Revere

The early pioneers who came to this country brought with them two types of music: religious and folk. Both played major roles in the musical milieu, but the functional need for church music helped promote choral works. Nearly forgotten are the Huguenot settlements in Florida, which occurred almost fifty years before the landing of the Pilgrims; their music was transplanted and certainly not an original American style. The Puritans in seventeenth-century New England imported the Psalm-singing traditions of the Reformation. Since religion dominated their lives and the lives of everyone in the community even if they were not members of the church, religious music naturally took precedence over that of the secular world. Percy Scholes, in *The Puritans and Music in England and New England*, corrected the unfortunate stereotype of the Puritans as being universally opposed to music and the fine arts in general.[5] Folk music was used on special occasions, but church music was *always* present. The folk music that survived continued to be transformed throughout succeeding generations, and American folk art prospered and changed during the growth and expansion of the new civilization.

Overview: the 18th century

As the eighteenth century progressed, New England established a more solid, humanized social identity, and it is here where the true "art music" had its foundations. European thinking continued to dominate the music, but because American amateurs were the creators and re-creators, a less professional posture evolved. These stalwart American composers began to create a new personality that represented their culture.

Some of these "native" American musicians are familiar to today's choral directors, not because of the compelling quality of their music, but more often as an historical contrast to the sophisticated European music of that time. It is highly doubtful that most conductors who program early American choral music do so because they and their audiences are attracted to the beauty and ingenuity of the music, but then that is true with many types of concert music. A high quality level of this music should not be expected—these composers were "Yankee tunesmiths",[6] as labeled by H. Wiley Hitchcock, because they did not have the cultural development and training of their professional European counterparts.

Some of the early American composers whose music remains modestly present in today's choral repertoire include:

Supply Belcher (1751–1836)
William Billings (1746–1800)
Elkanah Kelsay Dare (1782–1826)
Jacob French (1754–1817)
Christian Gregor (1723–1801)
Uri K. Hill (1802–1875)
Oliver Holden (1765–1844)
Jeremiah Ingalls (1764–1838)
Stephen Jenks (1772–1856)
Justin Morgan (1747–1738)
Timothy Olmstead (1759–1848)
Daniel Read (1757–1856), and
Timothy Swan (1758–1842).

They had professions other than music. For example, Supply Belcher was a tavern keeper; William Billings, a tanner; Oliver Holden, a carpenter; Justin Morgan, a horse breeder; and Daniel Read, a comb maker. Their music is available in performing editions because of the research and effort of musicians in the last half of the twentieth century such as Leonard Van Camp,[7] Irving Lowens,[8] Lawrence Bennett,[9] Kurt Stone,[10] and others.

Today it is **William Billings** whose music receives the greatest frequency of performance, and he has become a standard representative for music of this period. The year 2000 was the 200th anniversary of his death, and choral works such as *Chester, A Virgin Unspotted, David's Lamentation, Kittery, I Am the Rose of Sharon*, and *The Lord Is Ris'n Indeed* received numerous performances in concerts by church, school, community, and professional choirs. Billings generally is acknowledged to be the most gifted of the "singing school" composers of eighteenth-century America. His style, somewhat typical of the period, employs fuguing tunes, unorthodox voice leading, open-fifth cadences, melodic writing in each of the parts, and some surprising harmonies.[11] By 1787 his music was widely known across America.

Billings was an interesting personality as well. Because out-of-tune singing was a serious problem, he added a 'cello to double the lowest part.[12] He had a "church choir," but that policy met resistance from aging deacons, although by 1779 a gallery was placed in the church for "the singers". It was Billings who proclaimed:

> He who finds himself gifted with a tunable voice, and yet neglects to cultivate it, not only hides in the earth a talent of the highest value, but robs himself of that peculiar pleasure, of which they only are conscious who exercise that faculty.[13]

It would seem that problems often faced by today's church choir directors were also present in the eighteenth century.

Extensive research in the music of this period has provided contemporary conductors with understanding of the style, and background for performance. Two important studies are Alan C. Buechner, *Yankee Singing School and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1760-1800*,[14] and Dickson D. Bruce, *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800–1845*.[15]

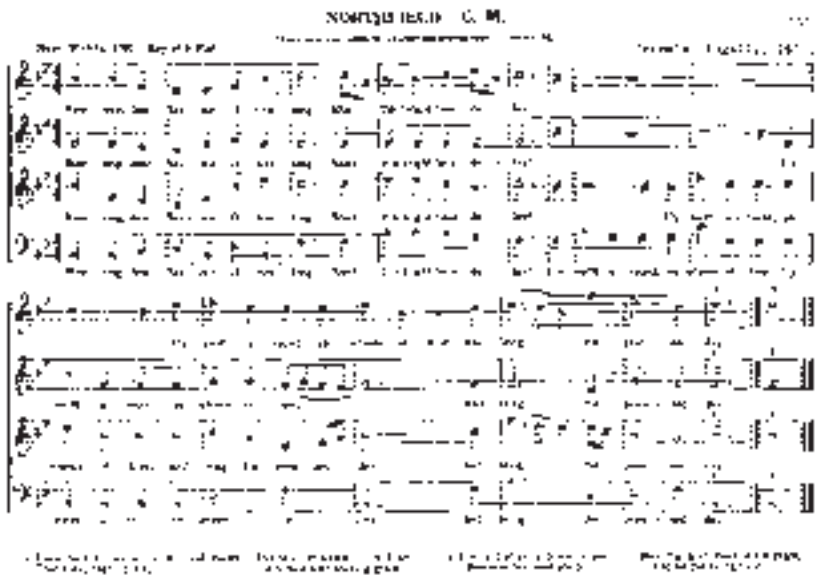
Overview: the 19th century

In the late nineteenth century, a group of composers came to be known as "The Second New England School." They included **George W. Chadwick** (1854–1931), **Arthur Foote** (1853–1937), **Mrs. H.H.A. Beach** (1867–1944), and **Horatio Parker** (1863–1937). Parker, professor of music at Yale from 1894–1919, was possibly the most important American choral composer of the century. He, like many Americans, had been trained in Europe (Munich). His oratorio, *Hora Novissima* (1891), is a major work that established his place in the history of American music. After its 1893 performances in New York, Boston, and Cincinnati, in 1899 it became the first work by an American to be performed at the famous Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, England. This resulted in commissions for prestigious English choir festivals and the acceptance of an American compositional school by the international community.

Parker's music is rarely performed today and exhibits Teutonic rather than American tendencies, yet his influence through his teaching of such noted composers as **Douglas Moore** (1892–1969), **Quincy Porter** (1897–1966), and the quixotic **Charles Ives** (1874–1954), indirectly makes him the father of twentieth-century American choral music. Parker, and to a somewhat lesser degree **Dudley Buck** (1839–1909), serve as transitional figures from the rudimentary choral music that preceded them, to the more solid styles and schools that came after them. In teaching Charles Ives, Parker's conservatism proved to be more negative than positive, and Ives eventually abandoned the Romantic spirit and style of Parker to become America's first great composer.[16]

Parker, a dedicated musician, wrote in a variety of genres, including orchestral and operatic; however, it is in church music where his contributions seem to be most recognized. Erik Routley boldly

Jeremiah Ingalls, *Northfield* fuguing tune



states that Parker's *Mount Zion* is "probably one of the best hymn tunes of its age."[17] His musical style, prudent and old-fashioned, still represented an elevation in the quality level of American choral music at the end of that century. He had developed a solid craft that gave his music more depth than others of his generation or before. His ability to write in larger forms raised the appreciation of the American composer in the international forum.

The only other truly significant American choral composer between Billings and Parker was Dudley Buck. Typical of many nineteenth-century American composers, Buck studied in Europe. As with Horatio Parker, Buck wrote useful, yet conservative, anthems employing solo quartets in alternation with the full chorus. Before 1870 it was customary to write anthems for solo quartet without the choir, and Buck had a "concern for the differing characteristics of quartet and choral music."[18] He composed in all musical forms and was highly regarded in his lifetime. Wienandt and Young suggest that:

> Although Dudley Buck was not a threat to the superiority of European composition, he was the best that America could then bring to the field of church music. . . . The American examples of this period are shabby at best. [19]

There were, however, productive and relatively important nineteenth-century composers in other fields of music. Men such as **Louis Moreau Gottschalk** (1829–1869), **Stephen Foster** (1825–1894) and **Edward MacDowell** (1861–1908) were successful in their areas of interest. Gottschalk's music is considered to be among the best of the century. As a piano virtuoso, he toured Europe extensively. His adaptation of Creole melodies brought elements of the New World into the salons and concert halls of Europe and South America. This paved the way for the acceptance of an American style, which, even today, is very elusive.[20]

Undoubtedly, the most prominent choral musician of this middle period was **Lowell Mason** (1792–1872), although his primary compositional contributions were in hymns and singing books. He helped fashion a more refined style of American hymnody, different from the popular camp meeting songs of the time. His vital gift, however, was in the development and advancement of music education. His career reached a pinnacle in 1838 when he became the Boston Superintendent of Public School Music, which was the first such position in the United States.[21]

For choral music, though, it was the church that continued to provide the backbone for growth. *Protestant Church Music in America,* by Robert Stevenson, is a brief but very thorough survey of people and movements from 1564 to the present. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a steady rise in denominations and numbers of churches in America. Each had its own perspective on what was needed musically for their services of worship. Some of the more active denominations producing music of merit were the Methodists, the Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians. Men such as **James Lyon** (1735–1794) and **William Tuckey** (1708–1781) helped develop church music through composition, but their choral contributions were not particularly important. The use of organs in churches was mildly controversial in some denominations, but eventually that came to be common practice for most. Part of the problem was finding someone who could play the organ. According to Irving Lowens,

> As late as 1714, when after much discussion an organ imported three years earlier by Thomas Brattle was installed in Boston's King's Chapel, an organist had to be brought from England to Play skillfully thereon with a loud noise.[22]

As in the preceding century, Protestant church music was the primary vehicle for choral music in America during the nineteenth century. Much of the music was developed through music collections, and often these publications contained European music, which helped to make them more commercially profitable. Of the composers not previously mentioned, some of the most important were **William B. Bradbury** (1816–1868), **George Kingsley** (1811–1884), **Joseph P. Holbrook** (1822–1888), **Thomas Hastings** (1784–1872), and **George K. Jackson** (1745–1823).

In the first half of the century, European music dominated concert halls and other professional musical venues, but American church music flourished. Anthem collections by American composers steadily increased. However, as the sophistication levels rose, particularly in the North, there was a need to have more refined music than that in the standard "native" American repertory. Stevenson explains:

> Already by 1850 the American denominations had so drawn their social lines that some ministered to the wealthy and elite in big cities, while others served the common folk on farms and frontiers. Speaking of one 'elite' denomination in a course of historical lectures given at Berlin in 1854, Philip Schaff claimed that the Protestant Episcopal Church had addressed itself 'heretofore almost exclusively to the higher classes of society, and had rather discouraged the poor man from joining it.' With such a constituency, the music published for use in Episcopal churches at mid-century sounded quite a different note from that prevailing in publications for frontier churches, or even for middle-class urban churches.[23]

Church repertoire

Arguments persisted regarding the function of a church choir. Some felt that it should be to assist congregational singing, while others wanted a group that had its own identity and quality. These opinions on choir function have not ceased, and even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, impassioned cries of support or lack-of-support can be heard from some denominations and/or members within them. After 1865 churches developed their own hymnals, so that styles of music associated with certain denominations became even more established. Congregational singing always was important, but stylistic differences at this time were not limited to the Protestant churches, and in the late twentieth century, even the Roman Catholic hymnals moved toward a more folk-like or gospel-style inclusion.

In most American churches today, the anthem serves as the standard vehicle for choir performances. As traced by Wienandt and Young,[24] its history has been long and varied. It is not an American invention, but its development and use was an important factor in the spread of choral music. The anthem is an English derivative of the Latin motet, and as such was more musically complex than simple hymns sung by the congregation; therefore, more accomplished singers and preparations were needed for use in the service, and that concept has been in existence since ancient times.

> The word may be followed back to various forms of *Antiphon*, a term denoting the category of plainsong sung before and after psalms and canticles. It was the function of antiphons to amplify the text of scriptural material to which they were attached. They were numerous because such scriptural sections were used several times each day. References to the antiphon have been traced from as early as the beginning of the Christian era, but the various spellings, forms and meanings in English begin much later, perhaps not until around the eleventh century.[25]

Of special musicological interest is the word "antine," which was used in American music in the early years. Kingman states:

> There is no such word in English usage. Baring-Gould, collector of the first versions using it, postulates that it is a corruption of the French *antienne*, which means "antiphon." Since an antiphon is a piece of liturgical music, the image of every grove ringing 'with a merry antine' is a plausible and indeed a rather happy one.[26]

As stated earlier, the concept of the anthem was brought to this country. In the 1760s the publication of American anthems by "native" composers (**Francis Hopkinson** [1737–91] and **James Lyon** [1735–94]) led the way to an ever-expanding market of this genre. In most churches today, the anthem serves as the standard presentation of choir performance. It became a work of several pages' duration based on a scriptural or poetic text that may or may not be accompanied and almost always is in English.

In European Catholic churches, complete musical Masses were at one time very common, but today they are rare and generally found only in large and very musically active churches; even then, they may only be used on special occasions. Catholic churches throughout America most often celebrate Mass with brief musical intonations by a priest and congregational singing. Those choirs may prepare special music, such as an anthem, but their primary function is to help with congregational singing.

In many Protestant denominations choral singing is used in other places in the service (introits, responses, etc.). Some do not employ the term anthem, but, even if called special music or some other term, its function is that of an anthem. Often ministers and church choir directors differ on the function of the choir. For many ministers, church choirs are, above all, a help for congregational singing, and the preparation of an anthem is a bonus; for most church choir conductors, the opposite may be true. Regardless of their intended function, church choirs that have been successful serve in both capacities, and, for most people, the blending of these functions has been beneficial.

The rise of choral music in America owes much to congregational singing. Congregational response has long been a part of liturgy. Group singing in worship has been a vital part in the development of choral music, especially in America.

The prevailing aspect of congregational singing can be found in hymnody. Briefly, hymnody was an outgrowth of plainsong and originally a monastic technique. Musical hymns were melodies that were, at first, associated with the daily offices; they most often were Psalms, but other Scriptural texts were used as well. Their use continued to expand throughout the early centuries of Christianity, and in the hands of Martin Luther (1483–1546) congregational hymnody became a major segment of worship services in the Reformation. Melodies popular with the people thrived, and it is in this context that American hymnody took shape.[27]

Erik Routley, in *The Music of Christian Hymns*, states:

> The American tradition of hymnody falls into clearly defined streams which before 1900 were culturally separate, and which during the 20th century began to influence each other . . . We classify these streams as (1) the New England Style (2) the Southern Folk Hymnody (3) the Black Spiritual and (4) the Gospel Song. [28]

The New England tradition of hymnody was an outgrowth of Psalm singing, especially linked to the Scottish Psalter and the Ainsworth Psalter. America's first printed book, the 1640 *Bay Psalm Book*, attempted to replace those psalters, and did so for many generations. An important feature of the New England tradition was the establishment of singing schools. The intent was to improve congregational singing, but they also can be seen as an endemic factor in the development of choral music in America, because as singing improved, so did the need for music other than simple hymns. In many ways, the interest in the singing schools led the way for church choirs. For example, through diligent rehearsals in the meeting houses, congregational members grew musically proficient and sought special recognition; eventually, people with training sat and performed together in the church's "gallery," today called the choir loft.

Musical literacy influences

Two important early writers were **Thomas Walter** (1696–1725) and **John Tufts** (1689–1750). Walter's pioneer book of instruction, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* (1721), tried to provide rules and methods for sight-reading tunes. Tufts' *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes in a Plain and Easy Method* was also available in 1721, and he tried to instruct through letters instead of notes.[29]

Throughout the eighteenth century, singing schools and singing school teachers brought music to interested people. Emphasis remained on sacred music; however, the inclusion of secular tunes became more common. William Billings, the most famous of the singing teachers, produced six tune books containing the robust, energetic musical style found in his anthems. Other later significant musical missionaries who contributed to the spread of musical education were **Lowell Mason** (1792–1872), **Thomas Hastings** (1784–1872), and **Virgil C. Taylor** (1817–1891).

Black spirituals, white spirituals, and gospel song

In the South, hymnody progressed in different directions. Folk hymnody was a rural development that heavily relied on the shape-note tradition; this focused on assisting uneducated people to learn how to sing. George Pullen Jackson has been a leader in tracing the history of folk hymnody; he has authored three books dealing with the music and style associated with this genre.[30] The white spiritual was a term sometimes used for the hymnody of white settlers in southern states. Music books for this hymnody often use "shape note" characters to assist in reading the music. There were many publications of music which helped spread the shape-note concept. Some of those that merit attention include John Wyeth, *Repository of Sacred Music* (1810),[31] Ananias Davisson, *Kentucky Harmony* (1816),[32] William Walker, *Southern Harmony,*[33] B.F. White and E.J. King, *Sacred Harp.*[34]

Black spirituals were transmitted through oral tradition. The first black college, Fisk University, began in 1866. A group of student singers known as *The Jubilee Singers* toured America, England, and other European countries. They were responsible for spreading the knowledge and interest in Negro spirituals.[35]

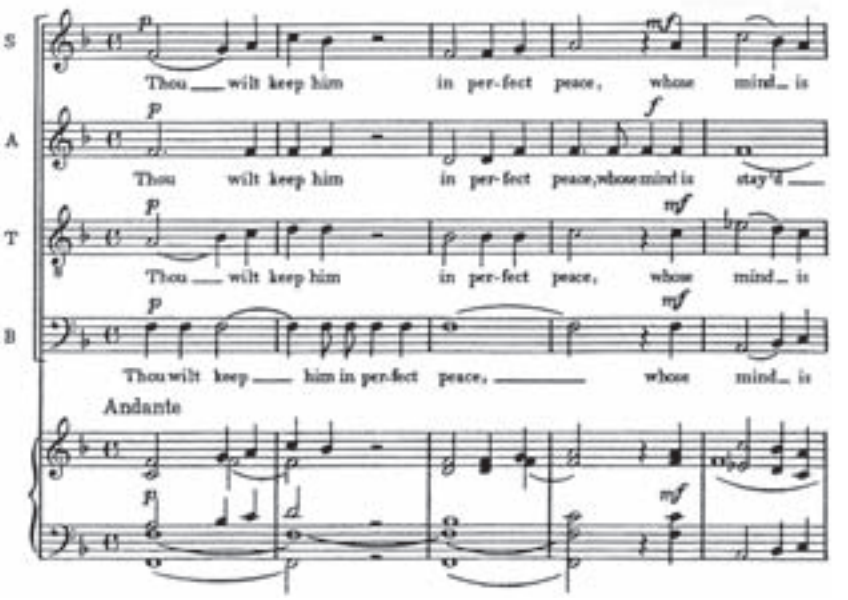
The gospel song was, as Routley indicates:

> Hymnody reduced to its simplest terms, it is cast in the form either of a solo song, or of a solo song with refrain, and this it has in common with the Black Spiritual.[36]

This style of hymnody grew out of the revivals that were particularly popular in the South in the nineteenth century. Evangelistic music existed in the 1730s and is associated with Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), but the true gospel songs became a formidable style around 1859. Typically, they sustain one chord for an entire measure and remain restricted to the three basic triads of tonic, subdominant, and dominant. This permitted strong rhythmic fluctuations and improvisation, which helped generate and intensify the emotional drive, a primary feature of evangelistic denominations. Whereas the other three streams of hymnody (New England style, Southern folk hymnody, and Black spiritual) have roots in foreign cultures, gospel music seems to be an American contribution.

One of many religious groups that came to America and developed a music for their denomination was the Shakers, although this folk-like music was unison, not harmonized, and unaccompanied, and not pure choral music. Possibly the most important may have been the Moravian tradition, which dates from the fifteenth century and is rich in a choral heritage. These people settled in Pennsylvania before 1740 and established communities such as Bethlehem, Lititz, and Nazareth; by 1783 they had expanded south to North Carolina. Donald M. McCorkle, director and editor-in-chief of the Moravian Music Foundation suggests that:

Dudley Buck, *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace*



> Most of the early Moravian composers were clergymen who wrote music apparently as easily as they did sermons. . . . The anthems and songs created by the Moravians were influenced primarily by contemporary musical trends of Central Europe. Since most of the choral and vocal music by American Moravians is conceived for mixed voices accompanied by instruments, it is quite different both in structure and content from other sacred music written in 18th-century America.[37]

Their musical past has been preserved and made available through definitive editions released under the title Moramus Editions. Three of the more significant American composers were **John Antes** (1740–1811), **Johann Friedrich Peter** (1746–1813), and **Johannes Herbst** (1735–1812). Peter, perhaps the most outstanding of the Moravian composers, wrote over 100 anthems and arias, as well as six string quintets in 1789, which may be the earliest extant examples of American chamber music. Antes composed twenty-five sacred anthems and twelve chorales, and possibly made the earliest violin in America in 1759.

New secular directions

Less dominant influences on the growth of choral music in America may be seen in the development of secular organizations and events. A product of the singing schools, for example, was the formation of music clubs. Organizations such as the Stoughton Musical Society developed by 1786 and Boston's Handel and Haydn Society, which began in 1815, did much to stimulate interest in choral singing. Often competitions between organizations were held, which encouraged improvements in quality.

In the nineteenth century, conventions and fairs were held, and they helped promote choral singing in America. **Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore** (1829–1892), through his Peace Jubilees, promoted gigantic mass performances by choirs of 10,000! These festivals involved enormous bands and orchestras; a structure was built to house an audience of 50,000. Villages and towns throughout New England filled their quotas of singers, and each had a local leader who had been instructed in the tempos so that everyone was well prepared when they met together to perform.

There were world's fairs held in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893, and singing played an important part at these international events. For the centennial, new choral works were commissioned from **John Knowles Paine** (*A Centennial Hymn*, text by John Greenleaf Whittier) and Dudley Buck (*The Centennial Meditation of Columbia*, text by Sidney Lanier). Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (which presented 36 choral concerts) featured music performed by some of the younger American composers, including G.W. Chadwick, Edward MacDowell, and Arthur Foote. Female composers were represented in a concert heralding the opening of the Woman's Building, including music by Mrs. H.H.A. Beach.[38]

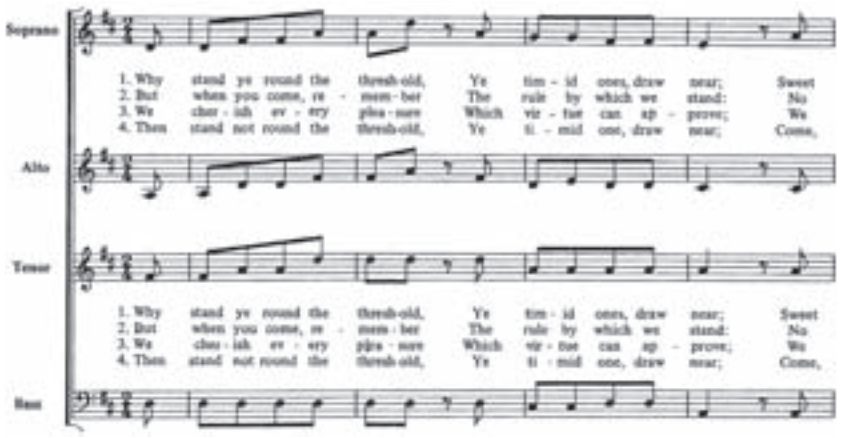
Another important development that fostered choral singing in America was the establishment of music schools and conservatories. Oberlin College had a Chair of Sacred Music in 1835. The first music courses at America's oldest institution, Harvard College, were not offered until 1862. Other beginnings of note were: 1865, Oberlin Music Conservatory; 1867, New England Conservatory of Music; 1867, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and the Chicago Musical College. These American schools did not eliminate the continuing process of seeking a European musical education, but as they grew in quality and numbers, they made a musical education more accessible.[39]

Social amusements were the initial reasons for the development of singing on college campuses. Glee clubs were formed, which performed local concerts for friends, and later they toured to sing for alumni. Eventually, more sophisticated groups developed; they performed the standard European favorites by Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and others. Probably the earliest official ensemble was the University Choral Union of the University of Michigan in 1879. Northwestern University, in 1906, was the first school to have an "a cappella" choir—Peter Lutkin, dean of the music school at Northwestern University, founded the Northwestern A Cappella Choir.[40]

Availability of music was an important factor in helping to encourage music in America. Some noteworthy landmarks in the publishing of music included the 1698 ninth edition of the *Bay Psalm Book,* which contained the first music printed in New England, and the 1761 James Lyon collection *Urania*, which was the first published setting of Psalms and hymns by a native-born American. Lyon was also active in the establishment of the first public subscription concerts in Philadelphia, and in other early musical ventures.

John S. Dwight (1813–1893) was not a composer, but his work in advancing standards of excellence was important. He was America's first music critic and editor of the first significant music journal, *Dwight's Journal of Music* (1852–1881).

Lowell Mason, madrigal



Opera and instrumental music also influenced the growth of choral music in America. While these genres did not have the benefit of the church to encourage their evolution and maturation, they were able to secure ongoing support from individual citizens. Most of the music before the middle of the nineteenth century was European; orchestras had been formed, but they performed repertoire by continental composers. By 1876 subscription concerts had begun in Philadelphia. It was common for orchestras (and opera singers) from Europe to tour in this country, and they too, perpetuated the standard works by recognized European composers.

Theodore Thomas (1835–1905) was an avid young conductor who did much to advance the professional American orchestra. His Theodore Thomas Orchestra, founded in 1862, toured for many years; in Chicago, Thomas's orchestra gained a permanent home and evolved into today's Chicago Symphony Orchestra. His pioneering helped encourage the formation of major professional orchestras, and before 1900 there were ensembles in St. Louis, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other large cities. Most relied heavily on benefactors who subsidized them financially. Wealthy families such as the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, and the Morgans were vital to the development of professional orchestras needed to provide opportunities for the performance of large-scale choral works.[41]

Opera also depended on the contributions of rich patrons. The public in the nineteenth century had come to opera from a background in minstrelsy, so cultivation of understanding was slow. Even today opera remains a genre that has less universal appeal than many other musical forms. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, there were major opera houses in operation. They brought European performers to the States, which helped develop an established audience. In comparison with other major musical genres such as orchestral, choral, or chamber music, the number of composers who write in this medium remains limited. Cost, technical requirements, and available performances are restrictive factors that have not successfully encouraged a corresponding growth to this vocal art form, yet it did have a modicum of influence on the growth of choral singing.

Summary

The commentary above is a brief examination of some of the events involved in the establishment and evolution of American choral music. There certainly were many other elements that could be pursued in a discussion of this type, but space does not permit a more detailed survey. America is a blend of heterogeneous cultures, and throughout the entire history of the country, people from other places have continued to come to her shores; they brought with them religious, artistic, and social elements of their past, but the most significant factor in any study on the evolution of American choral music must be the influence of the church.

Clearly, choral music began primarily because it was needed in religious ceremonies. In essence, the history of American choral music can be traced through the expansion of musical settings of liturgical words into the secular arena. The twentieth century saw a profound growth of choral singing.

The church, which was the overriding force in the development of choral singing, is now somewhat less influential. In today's society, one of the controversial issues in the choral field is whether to include sacred music as part of the repertoire of public school ensembles; this is a reflection of that secular expansion, even though a vast majority of quality choral works are based on sacred texts. This change of attitude is a reversal of the past. Singing schools were formed to help people learn to sing religious music, but beginning in the middle of the twentieth century some school systems or administrations began forcefully working to keep music with religious texts from being performed.

Nevertheless, the church remains an important advocate for music, especially choral, yet its interest in styles has seen a rapid shift during the past few decades. That shift has reduced the quality and amount of choral singing, as may be seen in the number of people in church congregations and ultimately church choirs. The church gave impetus to choral singing in this country, and today still is responsible for a large portion of choral performances, as well as the creation of new music. The difference is that it is not the primary leader in the proliferation of choral music, only an equal partner at best.

America was founded on the need and search for freedom in both religious and secular arenas. The church continues to evolve in society, and therefore its music, which has always been an important element, will also evolve. The same may be said for the secular side of society in which music is a vital component. The confluence of the two main forces (sacred/secular) will continue to be a major factor in the development of choral music in the twenty-first century, but the swing away from significant sacred choral music probably will increase just as it did in the twentieth century. ■

Notes

1. Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass" in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Viking Press [paperback reprint], 1987), p. 47.
2. Daniel Kingman, "American Indian Music, and Spanish and French Folk Strains" in *American Music: A Panorama* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), pp. 65–95.
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