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Sacred Music in Early Winchester

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Music, at least sacred music, was of vital concern to early New Englanders. It is significant that one of the first actions of the Puritan divines of Massachusetts Bay would be to prepare and publish the Bay Psalm Book of 1640, a new metrical translation of the Psalms for singing in public worship. A movement to reform congregational singing began in and around Boston about 1720, and soon became the subject of a heated controversy, whose repercussions came to be felt far beyond the Boston area. Fifty years later, the issue was still raising hackles in town and church meetings all over New England, while American composers were beginning to make their contribution to the church and singing school. Winchester, Connecticut, though not settled until the 1760's, soon became the scene of a Singing Controversy; by 1800 it numbered among its native residents at least one composer whose tunes would reach a large audience in Connecticut and beyond. The present article traces the background of psalmody in early Connecticut during the eighteenth century; Winchester, with its detailed records, is offered as an example of the rapid development of musical culture during this period. A subsequent article traces the career of Truman S. Wetmore (1774-1861) of Winchester, physician and musical composer, as typifying the rural Yankee musician of the early nineteenth century.

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The Boston reformers of the 1720's advocated a "Regular Way" of congregational singing, i.e., singing by note, in parts, according to written note values. To achieve this goal, they instituted singing schools as a means of instilling musical literacy among congregation members. They also printed the first musical instruction books in English America.¹ While the reformers' point of view is well documented through pamphlets and sermons,² as well as in the instruction books, the opposing point of view produced no literature of its own, but must have been widely held, especially in rural areas. Its adherents held to a practice, called the "Usual Way" to distinguish it from the reformers' "Regular Way." The "Usual Way," handed down by oral tradition, seems to have been a slow ornamented style of unison singing with no tangible rhythmic motion, often with several singers simultaneously singing differently embellished versions of the same melody.³ The text was "lined out" by the song leader in a spoken voice or, more likely, intoned in a chant-like melodic formula, a practice that may still be heard in the Hebrides and in the Southern Appalachians.

The singing reform in Connecticut lagged a little behind that in Boston, but in 1727 the matter broke into print in Hartford. In that year a ministerial association moderated by Timothy Woodbridge approved and recommended a tract entitled *Regular Singing Defended and proved to be the Only True Way of Singing the songs of the Lord* by Nathaniel Chauncey (New London: T. Green, 1728). Woodbridge also published a sermon entitled *The Duty of God's Professing People in Glorifying their Heavenly Father, Preached at a Singing-Lecture in Hartford East Society, June 28, 1727* (New London: T. Green, 1727). Like the Boston reformers, Woodbridge and Chauncey assumed a rhetorical stance which made no attempt to present fairly the opposing point of view. Chauncey, for example, used both logical arguments and appeals to clerical authority to establish "Whether in Singing the Songs of the LORD, we ought to proceed by a certain Rule, or do it in any Loose, Defective, Irregular way, that this, or that People, have Accustomed themselves unto."⁴

Evidence from local and church histories indicates that Regular Singing was officially adopted by most of the Connecticut Valley parishes between 1727 and 1740.⁵ Hartford's oldest church admitted regular singing in 1733 after a few months' trial period. Wallingford in 1731 voted to sing "half the time in the new and half in the old way for six Sabbaths, and after that wholly in the new way." Glastonbury set up a program of neighborhood singing

meetings to re-educate the congregation before adopting regular singing in 1733. New Britain, however, voted in 1727 to retain "the former way of singing psalms in this Society." Official action on church music was taken in each case by the Ecclesiastical Society, a Connecticut institution distinct from both Town and Church. The Society consisted of all male rate-payers in a geographical area served by a single meeting house of the established (Congregational) church. The Church in each Society was a smaller group of elect, covenanted Christians led by a pastor, which had no official voice in temporal affairs.

As Richard Crawford has pointed out,⁶ the existence of groups of musically literate singers eventually created a demand for more varied and complex music, which was to strain the bounds of traditional congregational psalmody. This tendency can already be seen in a manuscript music book from Durham, Connecticut, dated 1740, but probably completed as much as fifteen or twenty years later.⁷ In addition to psalm tunes for every meter, the manuscript contains several "hymns" not based on scriptural texts. One setting contains a "chorus," implying that other sections are to be sung by soloists or small groups. A few pieces contain rapid flourishes that appear difficult even for a well trained choir. The music is presumably of British origin, but its occurrence in a Connecticut deacon's copybook suggests that the simple settings of psalm tunes were no longer sufficient to excite the interest of the more ambitious Colonial singers.

By the 1760's the diffusion of sight-reading skills fostered by singing schools had not only led to the American reprinting of contemporary British psalmody,⁸ but also had stimulated the composition of new tunes by American musicians. In 1770 William Billings of Boston published his *New-England Psalm Singer*, which contained tunes solely of his own composition, thus increasing by tenfold the number of American tunes in print. Evidence exists that Connecticut singing masters may have been composing music even before that time. On September 25, 1769 the *Hartford Connecticut Courant* reported:

We hear from Wallingford, that a Society of Singing-Masters who have voluntarily associated, with a view to encourage Psalmody in this government, at their last meeting there, agreed to meet at the South Meeting-House in this town the first Wednesday of October next at one o'clock in the afternoon, when several new pieces of music will be performed, both with voices and instruments, and a sermon preached on the occasion.

During the 1770's choirs were formed in the larger Connecticut towns,⁹ consisting of young people of both sexes, who often sat in a special singers' seat or gallery in the meeting house. Led by lay choristers and section leaders, these choirs performed anthems and other complex pieces in addition to leading congregational psalmody. One such choir was heard by John Adams in Middletown on June 9, 1771.¹⁰ He described their music as

the finest singing that I ever heard in my life; the front and side galleries were crowded with rows of lads and lasses, who performed all their parts in the utmost perfection. I thought I was rapt up; a row of women all standing up and playing their parts with perfect skill and judgment, added a sweetness and sprightliness to the whole which absolutely charmed me.

Between 1770 and 1810 Connecticut musicians were influential in forming a style and a repertory of sacred music in New England. Connecticut composers wrote a majority of the forty-one American tunes that were among the one hundred tunes most frequently printed in America before 1810.¹¹ Connecticut compilers introduced many European tunes that became popular in New England. Connecticut singing masters travelled far and wide, teaching in New York, Pennsylvania and further west and south, bringing New England music to the frontiers of the new nation. Daniel Read, Andrew Law and Stephen Jenks were among the most ambitious and prolific Connecticut psalmodists during the period which Alan Buechner calls the "Golden Age of Choral Music in New England."

This "Golden Age" was late in coming to the more remote parts of New England, including the frontier region of northwestern Connecticut. Here the continued prevalence of the Old way of singing psalms necessitated a renewed campaign of reform. In Simsbury, a singing-lecture was held on March 18, 1773 on the "Occasion of introducing regular Singing into public Use in the Worship of God there."¹² In his sermon, Joseph Strong echoed many of the same arguments that had been used by Chauncey and Woodbridge forty-five years earlier in Hartford, only a few miles away. The following month, the Simsbury Society voted "to sing on the Lord's day in the afternoon according to the rules taught in the Singing Schools in this and in the neighboring societies."¹³ There remained opposition to be overcome. According to a later account,¹⁴

Soon after this a teacher of music was employed. After practising

some time, he appeared with his scholars in church on a Sunday, and the minister having announced the psalm, the choir, under the instructor's lead, started off with the tune much more lively than the congregation had been accustomed to hear. Upon which, one of the Deacons, Brewster Higley, took his hat and left the house,—exclaiming, as he passed down the aisle—'popery! popery!'

Within a few years Simsbury and neighboring New Hartford comprised one of the important centers of Connecticut psalmody. In this region between 1780 and 1800 lived Oliver Brownson, Asahel Benham, Thomas Lee and Elijah Griswold, all composers who compiled and published tunebooks of their own.

One of the last published sermons defending regular singing in the tradition of Symmes and Woodbridge was delivered in Litchfield, Connecticut on March 22, 1775, "occasioned by a public Meeting of the Singers, in that place." The preacher was Samuel J. Mills, pastor of Torrington, part of the town of Torrington. In addition to the usual polemic devices, Mills put a novel but timely objection into the mouth of his opponents:

that the State of the Nation is such as rather wears a forbidding Aspect, that the season is unsuitable for this Duty [of regular singing in public worship].

Mills replied:

It is granted, that the darkest Cloud now hangs over us, that ever was known. But it is not granted, that God is any the less worthy of praise on this Account. Our base neglect of this duty is rather to be considered, as one Sin among others, which provokes God thus to threaten us.¹⁵

This amounts to a unique interpretation of the events leading up to the American Revolution, and illustrates the grave importance of sacred music to many Americans.

Winchester, Connecticut, was a mountainous wilderness during the 1730's, when most Connecticut Valley towns were adopting Regular Singing. Settlers began trickling into the township during the 1750's and 1760's from neighboring towns like Torrington and Goshen, where musical customs remained primitive. An Ecclesiastical Society was formed and a rude meeting house built by 1769, measuring only thirty by twenty-four feet.¹⁶

At its second annual meeting on December 28, 1769¹⁷ the Society chose John Hills and Abraham Filley "Choresters." Their duty, defined at the next annual meeting, was to "sett the Psalm" (i.e. to furnish the starting pitch and lead the singing of the melody). In

addition the Society appointed David Austin "to read the Psalm" (i.e. to line out the text), and Beriah Hills "to assist to read the Psalm." The Society continued to appoint Choristers annually until 1798. A list of these appointments (Table 1) combined with other Society records and biographical and genealogical data from John Boyd's *Annals of Winchester* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Brainard, 1873), helps to establish a musical profile of the hilltop community over a period of almost thirty years.

After 1770 many new settlers, including men of means, arrived in Winchester from long-settled towns in the Connecticut Valley and Eastern Connecticut. The town grew rapidly, its population increasing from 179 in 1771 to 339 in 1774, though it was still an infant community within a county of some twenty-seven thousand souls.¹⁸ The town was incorporated in May, 1771, and the Church in Winchester was gathered in October of the same year. Fourteen members owned a confession of faith and a covenant, and in 1772 issued a call to Joshua Knapp, a recent (1770) Yale graduate, to be their pastor.¹⁹

Among the new settlers in 1772 was Levi Brownson of Berlin, Connecticut. Brownson soon became a prosperous farmer, and Winchester's first merchant. Possessing musical experience, he was appointed a chorister by the Society in December 1772. He continued to serve as Chorister for over twenty years, during which period he played a leading role in sacred music at Winchester.

In December 1773 the Society voted "the Psalm to be read before singing for the space of four months and then to be sung without reading." In other words, the practice of lining-out was to be dropped, requiring church-goers to possess psalm-books in order to participate audibly in public worship. There must have been some opposition to this measure, for a year later the Society voted "the Psalm to be read by line in Time of Singing." It is reasonable to assume that Levi Brownson and other newcomers from larger towns had pressed for reform, and were now defeated by conservative elements. If so, their defeat was only temporary; one month later, on January 3, 1775, the Society voted "to come into Mr. Brownson's Method of Singing."

Apparently the congregational practice at Winchester in 1770 was essentially the "Usual Way," that is, the universal practice in New England before the reforms of the 1720's, consisting of slow, ornamented unison singing of a lined-out text. "Mr. Brownson's Method of Singing" may have introduced music in three or four voice parts, or it may have implied singing in strict time, according to written note-values. Lining-out was apparently retained for a

time, since psalm readers were regularly appointed until 1777.

During the Revolutionary War, most adult males were required to leave Winchester, at least for short periods. A muster roll of Captain John Hills's company, dated 1778,²⁰ lists the names of most of Winchester's able-bodied men. The three officers, Captain John Hills, Lieutenant Benjamin Benedict and Ensign Ozias Brownson, were all Choristers in the Winchester Society. Of the five musicians' names on the roll, three, Belah Hills and Levi Brownson, fifers, and Andrew Everitt, drummer, were Winchester Choristers. Abraham Filley, one of Winchester's first Choristers, is



Fig. 1. Second Winchester Meeting House. From Program, Celebration of the Forty-fifth Anniversary of Rev. Arthur Goodenough as Pastor of the Winchester Congregational Church, 1870–1915. Winchester Center, Connecticut, August 25, 1915.

known to have served as a musician in a company from nearby Torrington.²¹ The intermittent absence of most of the community's musical leaders must have had a disruptive effect on the Society's psalmody, and may have stimulated interest in singing on the part of female members of the congregation.

By the 1770's, when many Connecticut communities were forming choirs of young singers to lead congregational singing and to perform more complex extra-liturgical music, Winchester too moved toward establishing a separate body of singers. A gradual increase in the number of Choristers between 1772 and 1783 may

indicate a change in their role, from leading the congregational singing to that of section leaders for the several voice parts of a choir. In December 1781 the Society voted "the Women Singers sit on the Cross fore seat, & the Men Singers as usual," revealing that singers were separated from the rest of the congregation, even in the tiny Winchester meeting house, and that the singers included women, who, however, were never given the title of Chorister.

During the 1780's the town of Winchester continued to grow, reaching a population of 688 by 1782.²² From 1783 on, the Society periodically considered replacing the old meeting house, which had become too cramped, but in May 1785 it was decided instead "to repair the old meeting house, viz: lay down boards on the joists, that people may sit above." The makeshift gallery, entered by a ladder or stairway outside the building, was intended to serve until a new meeting house could be built. On November 17, 1787 it was "voted the Singers sit on the Seats now appointed by Mr. Levi Brownson," implying some controversy over the reassignment of seats on account of the new gallery.

The 1790's saw a change in the economy of Winchester and neighboring towns. Farming had been the chief occupation since the area's settlement, but new arable land was increasingly scarce in the hills of Northwestern Connecticut. Young men returned from working on turnpike construction projects in "Western" New York (mainly Oneida County) with reports of cheap fertile lands to the west.²³ After 1795 a "Great Exodus" began, in which entire families sold their land and goods and removed to New York State.²⁴ The town of Vernon Center, New York, for example, was settled almost exclusively by families from Winchester and Torrington, including many church and civic leaders. While the population of the hilltop community of Winchester was being depleted by emigration, a newer settlement at nearby Winsted was attracting settlers with its cheap water power and easy accessibility by newly-built roads. Within the town limits of Winchester, Winsted was growing into an industrial center that would eventually eclipse the Old Society almost completely, as shown by the removal of the United States Post Office from Winchester Centre to Winsted in 1807.²⁵

The Winchester Society saw vigorous musical activity during the 1790's despite declining population. By 1795 the long-contemplated meeting house was virtually complete (Figure 1) and included galleries for the singers. Measuring fifty-four by forty feet, it was "a well built house in the usual style of like edifices of that day, without steeple or bell and placed on the public green."²⁶ A

new minister was settled in 1791: Publius V. Booge, a 1787 Yale graduate. Further steps were taken to improve church music. In November 1792 the Society voted

to raise one Penny on the Pound of the list of August last to be applied to the purpose of hiring a singing master to instruct singing Psalm tunes and Anthems in this society.

An official was appointed to collect the tax "to revive singing." These measures represent the usual method of financing singing schools in rural Connecticut: the religious Society subsidized children's musical instruction in the hope of training choristers and part-singers for the Society's public worship.²⁷ A singing teacher was hired, and presumably held classes during the winter of 1792-93, since the Society voted the following November "to lay out the remainder of the rate voted in the last annual meeting to revive singing to be laid out in the most advantageous manner for the society." The same meeting appointed three young men Choristers to assist Levi Brownson and Jesse Hills. The three, Thomas Spencer, Jr., Joseph Elmore and Truman Wetmore, had probably attended the singing school during the previous winter. The singing master's identity is not known.

In 1795 Levi Brownson, a prime influence in church music for twenty years, emigrated to New York State, leaving the musical leadership to a younger generation of Choristers. In April, the Society voted to pay Brownson "for his services in instructing singing." In 1798 eight Choristers were appointed, the largest number recorded for any one year.

In 1800 the minister, Mr. Booge, accepted a call from Vernon, New York, where many Winchester families had settled. Psalmody continued to be practiced, but the records of it are less abundant than before. Choristers were no longer chosen at Society meetings after 1798. Singing schools were held every few years by singing masters selected by a Committee of the Society.²⁸ These periodic singing schools and "revivals" of sacred music suggest an ebb and flow of musical interest and proficiency on the part of local youth, analogous to the fluctuations of religious zeal between evangelical revivals during the same period. Occasionally the Society minutes show the amount of money expended for musical instruction. In 1809 it cost "thirty-five dollars of the Society's Money to pay a teacher of Psalmody to Instruct the youth and others in the art of singing the present year." In 1816 it was necessary "to appropriate sixty Dollars for the purpose of reviving sacred music."

It was probably during the early years of the nineteenth century

that instrumental music was first introduced into public worship at Winchester. According to a local historian,²⁹

no instrument of music was allowed in the church for many years, but after much discussion and prayer over both man and fiddle, Deacon Lorrain Loomis was allowed to play a Bass Viol for a few services. But it was a "Godless Thing," and "an invention of the Devil!" And he was compelled to stop playing, and worship in the way his Fathers had. He still persisted, and argued, and later, after fully proving his piety, and especially that of the fiddle, was allowed to play again, and continued to do so, for many years.

From its settlement in 1769 to 1810, the small rural community, Winchester Center, supported a musical life that, while it would have been considered backward by Boston standards, was apparently typical of the remoter regions of rural New England, including Vermont, Western Massachusetts and Northwestern Connecticut. During the 1790's, while many Americans in Boston and other coastal towns were becoming increasingly doubtful and apologetic about the quality and dignity of American church music,³⁰ rural composers and singing masters, including Winchester's own Truman S. Wetmore, were vigorously and confidently pursuing a native tradition of New England psalmody.

FOOTNOTES

¹ John Tufts, *Introduction to the Art of Singing Psalm-Tunes* (the earliest surviving copy is the 3rd ed., Boston: S. Gerrish, 1723), and Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick* (Boston: S. Gerrish, 1721).

² This polemic literature is summarized in Gilbert Chase, *America's Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), p. 22-40, and in David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 9-22.

³ David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings*, p. 14-16.

⁴ Nathaniel Chauncey, *Regular Singing Defended* (New London: T. Green, 1728), p. 10.

⁵ Connecticut local records relating to singing reform are summarized 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), p. 118, and in N. H. Allen's manuscript history of music in Connecticut, chapter 2. Allen's manuscript work was recently discovered in the Watkinson Library, Hartford, by Ruth M. Wilson. The following references to specific towns may be found in Buechner's dissertation.

⁶ David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings*, p. 23-24.

⁷ "Deacon Storey's Singing Book of Durham, Conn. 1740," manuscript, in The Newberry Library, Chicago. According to Richard Crawford, the later date is more likely, since several of its tunes were first published in America only in the 1750's (personal communication). See also Robert Stevenson, "Jeremiah Clarke Hymn Tunes in Colonial America," *The Hymn* 29 (January, 1978), p. 15-18.

⁸ William Tans'ur, *The Royal Melody Compleat* (London, 1755 and Boston, 1767) and Aaron Williams, *The Universal Psalmist* (London, 1763 and Newburyport, 1769).

⁹ Documented in Alan C. Buechner, "Yankee Singing Schools," p. 118.

¹⁰ John Adams, *Diary*, Vol. 2 of *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1850), p. 275.

¹¹ Richard Crawford, "Massachusetts Musicians and the Core Repertory of American Psalmody" (unpublished article).

¹² Joseph Strong, *The Duty of Singing* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, n.d.).

¹³ Simsbury Society records, quoted in Noah A. Phelps, *History of Simsbury, Granby and Canton from 1642 to 1843* (Hartford: Case, Tiffany and Burnham, 1845), p. 167.

¹⁴ Noah A. Phelps, *History of Simsbury*, p. 167.

¹⁵ Samuel J. Mills, *The Nature and Importance of the Duty of Singing Praise to God, Considered* (Hartford: Ebenezer Watson, 1775), p. 13.

¹⁶ John Boyd, *Annals and Family Records of Winchester, Connecticut* (Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Brainard, 1873), p. 78-79.

¹⁷ Winchester First Congregational Church Records, in Connecticut State Library. Other references to "Society records" in the following text pertain to these record-books.

¹⁸ John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 82, 122.

¹⁹ John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 86-89.

²⁰ John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 164-165.

²¹ Samuel Orcutt, *History of Torrington, Connecticut* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1878), p. 223.

²² Connecticut Census, quoted in John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 158.

²³ Frank H. De Mars and Elliot P. Bronson, *Winsted and the Town of Winchester* (Winsted, Conn., 1972), p. 7.

²⁴ John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 223-224.

²⁵ John Boyd, *Annals of Winchester*, p. 295.

²⁶ Frederick Marsh, "Historical Sketches of the First Ecclesiastical Society in Winchester," manuscript, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, p. 34.

²⁷ In Massachusetts and other states the Town Meeting often raised taxes to finance singing schools, according to Alan Buechner, "Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England, 1760-1800" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1960), p. 193.

²⁸ According to Society Records, singing schools were held in 1806, 1809, 1813, 1816 and 1819.

²⁹ Elliot B. Bronson, *A New England Village Green* (np., 1914) p. 12.

³⁰ Richard Crawford, "A Hardening of the Categories: 'Vernacular,' 'Cultivated,' and 'Reactionary in American Psalmody,' in *American Studies and American Musicology: A Point of View and a Case in Point* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1975), p. 16-31.

