FROM RITUAL TO ART IN THE PURITAN MUSIC OF COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND:

THE ANTHEMS OF WILLIAM BILLINGS

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The manner in which Billings’s music contrasts with the Puritan musical ideal clearly demonstrates his role in the transition from ritual to art in the music of eighteenth-century New England. The tenets of Puritan worship included the restriction that music should serve primarily as a form of communal prayer for the congregation and in a secondary capacity to assist in biblical instruction. Billings’s stylistic independence from Puritan orthodoxy began with a differing ideology concerning the purpose of music: whereas Calvin believed music merely provided a means for the communal deliverance of biblical text, Billings recognized music for its inherent aesthetic worth. Billings’s shift away from the Puritan musical heritage occurred simultaneously with considerable change in New England in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. A number of Billings’s works depict the events of the Revolutionary War, frequently adapting scriptural texts for nationalistic purposes. The composition of occasional works to commemorate religious and civic events reflects both the increase in society’s approval of choral music beyond its nominal use in worship, both in singing schools and in choirs. With his newfound independence from Puritan ritual, Billings seems to have declared himself one of the United States of America’s first musical artists.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To those familiar with his musical output, the name of William Billings is practically synonymous with Revolutionary New England. “Revolutionary” seems to be a more apt description of Billings’s context and of his music than “Puritan,” the more frequently used adjective. The Puritans of colonial New England staunchly maintained the Calvinist musical practice of unaccompanied psalm-singing as an instructional activity devoid of aesthetic significance as musical art.¹ Cyclone Covey describes William Billings as a composer of this Puritan mindset whose “Calvinist upbringing was still so strong that he wrote hardly any music except religious vocal numbers.”² Covey’s assessment, however, fails to consider that Billings wrote anthems for trained singers to perform, itself a step away from the Puritan model of music composed exclusively for congregational use in worship. Indeed, Billings’s anthems reflect dramatic social and political changes occurring in and around late eighteenth century Boston more than they represent Puritan orthodoxy. Brought about by the emergence of secularism associated with the Revolutionary War, such cultural shifts provided a foundation for Billings’s perspective on music as an art form rather than as solely a form of ritual. Richard Crawford acknowledges this feature of Billings’s output in his survey, America’s Musical Landscape, which contains a chapter titled, “Ritual to Art: The Flowering of Sacred Music.”³ Similarly, Nym Cooke agrees that the anthem Peace specifically represents a terminal stage in the “transition from ritual to art” in music from colonial New England, a

¹ John Ogasapian, Church Music in America, 1620 to 2000 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 5-6.
² Cyclone Covey, “Puritanism and Music in Colonial America,” The William and Mary Quarterly 8 (1951): 381-382.
process that he claims began with the publication in 1698 of the ninth edition of *The Whole Booke of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Metre*, more commonly known as the “Bay Psalm Book,” which was the first publication in North America to be printed with musical notation.⁴

Covey’s assessment of William Billings as a Puritan composer contributed to a major shift in the opinion of Billings among historians of American music in the middle of the twentieth century. Before 1960, scholars examined the music of Billings from the perspective of the harmonic language associated with the European tradition of Bach and Haydn, by which standard Billings’s music sounded unrefined and ignorant. In 1952, Allen Gilbert described Billings and his contemporaries as “enthusiastic and sincere but musically untrained men,” whose music “when judged by the standards of European music of the eighteenth century …is crude and primitive.”⁵ When later scholars assessed Billings in the context of the Puritan musical tradition, rather than that of European art music, they expressed a more sympathetic understanding of Billings and his generation as “the first creators of unmistakably American music,” in the words of Richard Crawford.⁶ In 1960, J. Murray Barbour already describes Billings as “the most important composer of the pioneer period of American church music” and critiques earlier writings on Billings for being “derogatory and patronizing.”⁷ Furthering the new perspective of Billings, Ralph Daniel describes the works of Billings as “intrinsically

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attractive as music and [that] compare very favorably with reputable English products of the same period.”

A renewed interest in the research of Billings occurred in the 1970s—timed to coincide with the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence—that included the publication of a definitive biography of Billings by Richard Crawford and David McKay,\(^9\) scholarly editions and a thematic catalogue of his complete works. Surveys of American musical history, however, still only provide limited biographical information on Billings, labeled as a patriot composer due primarily to his plain tune \textit{Chester}, with a description of his physical abnormalities and a brief overview of his compiled tunebooks.

In 1992, Karl Kroeger was the first to argue in the scholarly literature that Billings attempted “to introduce art into the utilitarian domain of psalmody” with the publication of \textit{The New England Psalm Singer} in 1770. In so doing Kroeger was the first to describe the divergence between Billings’s view on music and the Puritan belief that music should be restricted to use in worship.\(^{10}\) This distinction does not go quite far enough however. By the end of his career, Billings’s compositional approach reflects Revolutionary-era culture more than the Puritan tradition, and for that reason represents the most significant early step away from that tradition in late eighteenth century New England. Indeed, Billings’s anthems frequently present a sharp contrast to the prevailing Puritan view of music as ritual and not as art.

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At the time William Billings published his first collection of works, *The New-England Psalm-Singer* in 1770, the Puritan musical ideal had been established for more than two hundred years. John Calvin’s beliefs about music formed the core principles of Puritan music that remained integral to New England Congregationalists until the time of Billings’s first publication. In his 1951 article, Cyclone Covey argues that the impact on the use of music in worship by Puritans in England and America “was wholly in accord with Calvin’s opposition to choirs, instruments, hymns, or any music in church except metrical psalms sung unaccompanied.”

Rather than describing Puritan music for what it was, Covey renders the subject unfavorably by portraying the characteristics in the negative. According to the characteristics of Puritan music defined by Calvin’s theology, Covey is only partially correct in his assessment of Puritan music.

Following in the footsteps of Martin Luther’s reformist activities, Calvin created a style of worship that was nonetheless unique in comparison to those of the Lutheran and Catholic churches. Concomitantly, he believed that the music for worship should be just as distinct as the liturgy itself. As suggested by Charles Garside, Calvin held that the music should be “in a style so distinctive that when heard it would be set apart at once and unmistakably from all other existing music, ecclesiastical as well as secular.”

Furthermore, Calvin put forward a clear idea of the characteristics of this

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11 Covey, “Puritanism and Music in Colonial America,” 380-381.
distinctive musical style in his theological teachings and writings. According to Calvin’s Sermon 66, on I Samuel, Chapter 18:

All that is needed is a simple and pure singing of the divine praises, coming from heart and mouth, and in the vulgar tongue.\(^{13}\)

That is, for Calvin the Puritan musical style should be characterized by unaccompanied congregational singing of unison settings of the biblical texts translated into the vernacular language of the congregation.

Although Luther had already begun incorporating the vernacular into the liturgy, by using German in addition to Latin, Garside asserts that a worship service entirely in the vernacular was indispensable to Calvin.\(^{14}\) In the *Institution of 1536*, Calvin explains:

> Public prayers must be couched not in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English (as heretofore been the custom) but in the language of the people, which can be generally understood by the whole assembly. For this ought to be done for the edification of the whole church, which receives no benefit whatever from a sound not understood.\(^{15}\)

Moreover, the use of the vernacular applied to every aspect of the Calvinist liturgy, including the singing of Psalms. Calvin believed that the Psalm text, not the music to which the texts were sung, should be the primary focus in congregational singing and insisted that if the language of the text were not understandable to the congregation, focus would shift away from the text and onto the music itself.\(^{16}\)

The theological roots of Puritan music can be traced back to the *Articles of 1537*, a document written by Calvin to address the concerns facing the establishment of standardized worship in the early Puritan church, including the necessity of singing


\(^{14}\) Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 27.

\(^{15}\) Quoted in Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 27.

Psalms. In an attempt to reconstruct the musical worship of the early Christian church as influenced by Jewish psalmody, Calvin states:

The other matter is the psalms which we wish to be sung in the church as we have it from the example of the ancient church and also the testimony of Saint Paul, who says that it is good to sing in the congregation with mouth and heart.17

According to Nicholas Temperley, the musical effect of congregational singing was not a concern for Calvin, whose belief contrasted with that of Luther: whereas Luther believed that glorifying God through music should rouse the spirit, Calvin considered the act of congregational singing to be a form of collective prayer.18 Indeed, Calvin claimed:

Furthermore it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be aroused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love.19

This importance of congregational singing remained central to Puritan worship in colonial New England throughout the eighteenth century. Discussing the prevailing attitude regarding the formation of church choirs drawn from the congregation in the final decades of the eighteenth century, Karl Kroeger notes, “Although a few churches had reluctantly permitted singing school graduates to sit together, the idea that this group should perform alone without including the congregation was unthinkable.”20 Although the eventual establishment of the church choir participated in a new conception of the role of music in worship, congregational singing would continue to remain a significant part of Puritan liturgical practice.

17 Quoted in Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 10.
19 Quoted in Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 7-8.
Wanting to restrict sung texts only to what appears in the Bible, Calvin found the Psalms to be most suitable for Puritan worship, as they were biblical and were intended to be sung in their original context.\textsuperscript{21} Calvin explicitly called for Psalm singing in his \textit{Addition to the Epistle of 1543}, claiming the church could find “no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him.”\textsuperscript{22} Austin Caswell suggests that the singing of Psalms offered a secondary, instructional purpose so that “their memorization and constant use ensured the proper level of informed belief in each church member.”\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, singing Psalm texts proved to be an efficient method of fostering the communal act of prayer and biblical study. New England Puritan leaders at the beginning of the eighteenth century continued to believe in the exclusive use of Psalm texts for congregational singing. As David Music indicates, Cotton Mather’s desire to preserve “metrical psalmody as the only suitable musical vehicle for stated worship occasions of the church” strictly adhered to the views of earlier prominent Puritan ministers, including Calvin and his own grandfather, John Cotton.\textsuperscript{24} Mather defended psalmody by arguing that texts written by men were inferior to “the songs which are prepared for us by the Holy Spirit of God,” echoing the language Calvin used to describe the Biblical Psalms.\textsuperscript{25}

By the end of the sixteenth century, the significance of singing Psalms in Calvinist worship had led to the cultivation of the metrical psalm, a genre characterized by translations of the Psalms into the vernacular language with clear poetic meters and

\textsuperscript{22} Quoted in Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 23-24.
\textsuperscript{23} Caswell, “The Hymn,” 52.
\textsuperscript{25} Richard Crawford, \textit{America’s Musical Life}, 30.
rhyme structures. Calvin first attempted to create a psalter for use in worship in Strasbourg, where he originally encountered German metrical psalmody. The *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantiques mys en chant*, containing nineteen metrical psalm texts and eighteen monophonic melodies, was printed in Strasbourg in 1539, and was hence labeled the Strasbourg Psalter. A precursor to the Genevan Psalter, the Strasbourg Psalter typifies the musical style that Calvin had intended for use in Puritan worship. Caswell explains that the unharmonized melodies to which the psalm texts were set “were for the most part stanzas of four symmetrical lines each, repeated again and again to accommodate all the verses of the psalm.” Additionally, Kroger describes the melodies as “designed to fit one syllable of text to one note or, at the most, occasionally two notes of music” with “conjoint, step-wise melodic motion with the vocal range confined largely to an octave or less.” The monophonic, syllabic text setting of Psalm 129 in the Strasbourg Psalter illustrates the “plainness” of the melodic line with generally conjunct motion (ex. 1). Such melodic simplicity was intended to ensure, as Calvin cautions, that “our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words.” The Strasbourg Psalter provided the model for each of the major psalters that would follow: the Genevan Psalter in 1551, the Dutch and the English Sternhold & Hopkins Psalters in 1562, and the Ainsworth Psalter in 1612.

27 Ogasapian, *Church Music in America*, xiii.
As the Pilgrims and Puritans settled in New England, they brought both the Sternhold & Hopkins and the Ainsworth Psalters with them to the colonies.³¹ For the colonists, the tunes in the Ainsworth proved to be too long and difficult to sing, and the translations in the Sternhold & Hopkins were considered to have too many alterations to the biblical meaning of the text.³² The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre, or the “Bay Psalm Book” as it came to be known, was published in 1640 in an attempt to correct these problems.³³ The first eight editions of the Bay Psalm Book were published without musical notation and the ninth edition of 1698

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³² Ibid., 16, 18.
contains only thirteen notated tunes (ex. 2). When Thomas Walter’s *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* was first published in 1721, the tunebook contained three-part setting for use in singing schools, although the tunes themselves remained “plain” for use in unison congregational singing.

Example 2: Psalm 23, from the “Bay Psalm Book”

![Musical notation image]

The final and probably most frequently noted characteristic of Puritan music was the requirement that congregational singing have no instrumental accompaniment. Calvin objected to the use of instruments in worship, including even the organ, in his Sermon 66:

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35 Ibid., 36.
It would be a too ridiculous and inept imitation of papistry to decorate the churches and to believe oneself to be offering God a more noble service in using organs and the many other amusements of that kind.36

Calvin believed that the artistic adornment of the Roman Catholic Church, including the use of instruments, distracted from the meaning of the text and hindered worship.37 Similarly, John Cotton explicitly objected to instrumental music in his 1647 treatise, *Singing of Psalms a Gospel Ordinance*:

\begin{quote}
Now in the growne age of the heirs of the New Testament, such externall pompous solemnities are ceased, and no externall worship reserved, but such as holdeth forth simplicitie, and gravitie, nor as any voice now heard in the Church of Christ, but such as is significant and edifying by signification (1 Cor. 14.10, 11, 26) which the voice of instruments is not.38
\end{quote}

As Alan Buechner explains, Cotton upheld the Puritan concern regarding distracting influences in worship.39 In contrast with the Anglican churches in colonial New England that began installing organs as early in the eighteenth century as they acquired the funds to do so, only eleven Puritan Congregational churches had organs by the end of the century. The first organ in a New England Puritan church was not installed until 1770 in Providence, Rhode Island.40 The eventual inclusion of instrumental accompaniment, by either organ or gallery orchestra, was intended to improve singing rather than merely to embellish the music. This justification allowed Puritan leaders to permit the use of instruments in worship while maintaining Calvin’s concept of a pure and simple liturgical style.

39 Ibid.
CHAPTER III
BEYOND THE PURITAN TRADITION: BILLINGS’S MUSICAL STYLE

Of the five aforementioned characteristics of Puritan music, William Billings remained steadfast to only one in his entire musical output: the use of the vernacular language. Philosophical differences about the purpose of music are at the very center of what distinguishes William Billings from his Puritan musical forefathers. Whereas the Puritans were deeply convinced of the essentially utilitarian nature of music, Billings recognized the aesthetic value of music aside from its intended religious value. In the introduction to *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings presents a short essay “To all Musical Practitioners” in which he endorses a belief in artistic freedom:

> And indeed this is without slavish Effects of such a restraint as is here pointed out, and so I believe has every Composer of Poetry, as well as Musick, for I presume there is as strict Rules for Poetry as for Musick. But as I have often heard of a Poetical Licence, I don’t see why with the same Priority there may not be a Musical Licence, for Poetry and Music are in close Connection, and nearly allied.41

Billings concludes the essay with one of his most definitive statements regarding art and aesthetics in music saying, “So in fact, I think it is best for every Composer to be his own Carver.”42 In addition to breaking from established compositional practice of harmony and counterpoint, Billings’s sentiment also reflects his artistic independence from Puritan tradition.

In *The Singing Masters’s Assistant*, Billings reasserts his conviction in the aesthetic value of music in specifically musical terms through his composition of *Jargon* (ex. 3). In the piece, Billings responds to critics who had claimed that his use of

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42 Ibid., 1:33.
harmony was too consonant by filling every syllable of this short, homophonic work with varying levels of dissonance. In the introduction to the collection, Billings plainly states his motives for composing *Jargon* in the satirical address, “To the Goddess of Discord,” written in the form of a letter with a salutation to the “Dread Sovereign”:

I have been sagacious enough of late, to discover that some evil-minded persons have insinuated to your highness, that I am utterly unmindful of your Ladyship’s importance; and that my time, as well as my talents, was wholly taken up in paying my divoto to your most implacable enemy and strenuous opposer, viz. the Goddess of Concord.\(^43\)

A receipt from the goddess is printed following the conclusion of the letter that identifies *Jargon* as the “the best piece ever composed.” Although David McKay and Richard Crawford describe the piece as a “dissonant musical joke,” it clearly represents Billings’s ability to compose specifically for an intended aesthetic objective rather than any possible utilitarian use.\(^44\) In the satirical address, Billings’s not only uses a prosaic style that echoes the oratorical manner of sermons but also frequently employs terminology such as “goddess” and “demon,” which would have been nothing short of blasphemy in the view of strict Puritans such as Calvin and Mather. Indeed, the writings related to *Jargon* reflect the composer’s willingness to use sacred models for his own aesthetic purpose.\(^45\) Billings accomplishes similar ends musically in the piece by using what appears to be the plain tune form generally intended for congregational singing to set a text that would be completely inappropriate for worship in a dissonant harmonic language that is just as inappropriate.

\(^44\) McKay and Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*, 82.
\(^45\) Ibid., 86.
Given Billings’s inherent philosophical difference from Puritan orthodoxy regarding the role and function of music, his fundamental break with the primary characteristic and objective of Puritan music – its intended use for congregational singing – is not surprising. Billings was not completely against congregational singing, especially given that his collection, *Music in Miniature*, was written specifically for congregational use.\(^{46}\) Billings first noted his perspective on congregational participation in musical worship in his “Thoughts on Music” found in the introduction to *The New-England Psalm-Singer*:

> Much caution should be used in singing a Solo, in my Opinion Two or Three at most are enough to sing it well, it should be sung as Soft as an Eccho [sic], in order to keep the Hearers in an agreeable Suspense till all parts are joined together in a full Chorus, as smart and strong as possible.\(^{47}\)

Kroeger asserts that by distinguishing “Hearers” and the singers, Billings conceived of two different musical roles for the congregation: an active group of singers and a passive group of listeners.\(^{48}\) By drawing such a distinction, Billings directly contradicts

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the ideal of Puritan psalmody as a necessarily active communal experience for the entire congregation.

The rise of the church choir in late eighteenth-century New England as a select group of singers drawn from the congregation increased the quantity and quality of trained singers, and contemporary musical collections reflected the demand for distinctive repertoire that suited the abilities of these singers.\textsuperscript{49} The increasing number of anthems – a genre associated exclusively with trained singers – composed by Billings reflects a similar trajectory: his first collection, \textit{The New-England Psalm-Singer}, contained only four anthems, whereas his final collection, \textit{The Continental Harmony}, included seventeen.\textsuperscript{50} Along with the increase in the quantity of his anthems, most notably those in \textit{The Continental Harmony}, Billings’s late anthems are progressively longer and more complex.\textsuperscript{51}

The florid melodic writing in \textit{O Praise the Lord of Heaven}, for example, stands in stark contrast to the plain, simple tunes that Calvin advocated (ex. 4). In comparison to Calvin’s syllabic setting of Psalm 129, the ornate setting of Billings’s \textit{O Praise the Lord of Heaven} seems quite virtuosic and would have certainly aroused Calvin’s fear that the music, and the singing of the music, would draw attention away from the its text (cf. exx. 1 and 4). Billings’s use of sixteenth notes and dotted figures on the word “Hallelujah” and, most especially, the extended melisma on the word “praise” are more in line with a Lutheran use of music to enliven the spirit.

\textsuperscript{50} Daniel, \textit{Anthem in New England}, 105.
In Augustine: *Confessions and Enchiridion*, Calvin explicitly deplores such elaborate singing:

> Yet when it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess to myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.\(^{52}\)

In complete opposition to Calvin’s belief on the sinful nature of music, Billings offers insight in the introduction to *The Singing Master’s Assistant*, into his musical fervor that is consistent with his elaborate melodic style:

> That I am a Musical Enthusiast I readily grant, and I think it is impossible for any of it’s [sic] true Votaries to be otherwise; for when we consider the many wonderful effects which music has upon the animal spirits, and upon the nervous system, we are ready to cry out in a fit of Enthusiasm!\(^{53}\)

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\(^{52}\) Quoted in Garside, “Calvin’s Theology of Music,” 20.

Billing’s suggestion that music should actively stir emotion provides evidence of his belief in the aesthetic value of music.

Even with this apparent enthusiasm for music, Billings offered very little commentary on the use of accompanying instruments in his works. In the musical glossary found in the introductory writing to The Singing Master's Assistant, Billings offers only brief statements regarding the use of the instruments in the definitions of four terms:

**ORGAN.** The grandest of all Musical Instruments.

**PITCH-PIPE.** An Instrument to give tunes a proper pitch, consisting of, 1st the Chest, or hollow Tube; 2d the Register, or Slider, on which the letters are marked; which being pushed in, or down out of the Chest, until you get to the letter; then by blowing gently, you obtain the true sound. Observe not to blow too hard for that will cause a false sound; not too weak, for that will emit no sound at all. N.B. Most of the Pitch-pipes in the country are set too high, they should be regulated by the organ.

**SYMPHONY.** An air, which is played, or sang without words, before the song begins, and sometimes such airs are in the middle of a peice[sic] and at the end.

**VOLUNTARY.** An Air which is played on an Organ, it is performed in Church before service begins, to soothe the minds and calm the passions of the Audience, for the fit worship of God.\(^{54}\)

Although brief, these descriptions do not suggest that Billings was opposed to the use of instruments, and on the contrary, appear to favor their use, especially the organ. In all of Billings’s works, only three pieces include the use of instruments: one requires organ and two specify parts for a “symphony.” The anthem *I Was Glad* calls for an organ, because the piece was composed specifically for the introduction of the organ in worship at the First Church of Boston in March 1785.\(^{55}\) Another two anthems, *Peace*  

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 28-29.

and *O Thou to Whom All Creatures Bow*, include wordless passages marked “Symphony” and “Sym” respectively (exx. 5 and 6).\(^{56}\) Because Billings does not specify which instruments should play the “symphony” parts, his intent as to the instrumentation of these works remains unclear.

Example 5: William Billings, *Peace*, mm. 1-25

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Given the late eighteenth-century development of the “gallery orchestra” among churches that could not afford an organ, Kroeger suggests that any of the typical instruments found in such orchestras – including the bass viol, viola, violin, flute, clarinet, and bassoon – could have been used to play the symphony parts and also possibly to double the voice parts in any of Billings’s music.57 Furthermore, Ralph Daniel observed that the lack of any idiomatic instrumental writing for the “symphony” suggests that Billings’s lack of specificity regarding instrumentation might have been due to his unfamiliarity with instrumental methods, rather than to a desire to uphold the *a cappella* singing tradition.58

In addition to deviating from Puritan orthodoxy regarding musical style and lack of instrumentation, Billings also chose to set texts other than Psalms. J. Murray Barbour argues that Billings’s genius in constructing and synthesizing texts, especially those for his anthems, would have been severely diminished if his textual sources had

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been limited to the Psalms.\textsuperscript{59} In the preface to \textit{The New-England Psalm-Singer}, Billings aptly recognized the Puritan musical heritage of psalmody of which he was a product:

It would be needless in me to attempt to set forth the Usefulness and Importance of Psalm-singing, which is so universally known and acknowledged, and on which depends no inconsiderable Part of the Divine Worship of our Churches. But thus much would I say, That 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 a conscious who exercise that Faculty.\textsuperscript{60}

Although this statement refers to developing the naturally gifted singing voice, Billings moreover recognizes the desirability of cultivating musical talent as a whole to its fullest potential. For Billings, his musical ability as a composer was beyond the restrictions imposed by Puritan regulation of music in the church. His willingness to break from the Puritan musical tradition seemed to stem not from a disregard for it, but from his specifically artistic ambition that could not be contained within the limiting utilitarian characteristics of Puritan music established by Calvin.

\textsuperscript{60} Billings, \textit{Complete Works}, 1:3.
CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL INFLUENCES REFLECTED IN BILLINGS’S ANTHEMS

The publication of *The New-England Psalm-Singer* in 1770 was a bold artistic statement for the twenty-four year old William Billings and also foreshadowed his increasing divergence from the music of the Puritan Congregationalist church. Perhaps coincidentally, at the same time that Billings recognized the intrinsic aesthetic value of music in contrast to the existing idea of music for use in Puritan worship, the people of the North American colonies began to conceive of themselves as part of an independent United States. The turmoil and change in New England during the last three decades of the eighteenth century was a significant factor in reshaping of society and culture, including music. Such political and social forces from outside the domain of the Puritan culture provided the opportunity for Billings to pursue his artistic endeavors.

Of the influences on the works of William Billings, certainly nothing could have been more significant than the Revolutionary War, which is evident in the publication of *The Singing Master’s Assistant* in 1778. In addition to being the first American tunebook to be published after the start of the war, *The Singing Master’s Assistant* is distinct among tunebooks by New England composers and compilers for its overt display of nationalism. The fervent sense of patriotism displayed in *The Singing Master’s Assistant* also remained in Billings’s later works, including *Peace*. Such nationalistic works adapt and alter biblical texts, reflecting and depicting current events, and thereby express a clear influence from outside the Puritan musical practice.

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Billings usually set metered Psalms as plain tunes or fusing tunes and scriptural prose as anthems. According to J. Murray Barbour, Billings’s skill at combining biblical texts for his anthems demonstrates “a truly comprehensive, if not always profound, knowledge of the Bible.” Karl Kroeger offers the following commentary on Billings’s creative use of texts:

To enhance meaning and its transmission he does not hesitate to alter phrases, substitute words, or omit whole lines of texts. Holy Writ is not sacrosanct to him, and he molds his text to his expressive and dramatic purposes, sometimes mixing various versions of the sacred text with phrases of his own devising.

The adaptation of biblical texts provided a method for Billings to transform religious texts into political commentary about events surrounding the Revolutionary War.

In the anthem, *Lamentation over Boston*, Billings expresses his patriotic sentiment through a musical commentary on the British occupation of Boston in 1775-1776. The blending of biblical texts with newly written prose is common for Billings’s anthems generally, and substitution of biblical words to depict secular events is characteristic of his patriotic anthems specifically. Barbour first documented how the text to *Lamentation over Boston* demonstrates Billings’s ability to modify biblical passages combining them together and with his own original text.

![Billings: By the Rivers of Watertown](image)

*Peace 137:1*

By the Rivers of Babylon there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

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62 Beth R. Wagstrom, “‘Loud Halleluiahs Let Us Sing’: the Words and Music of William Billings” (DMA Thesis, University of Kansas, 2008), 12.
64 Kroeger, “Introduction,” 1:iii.
BILLINGS:
As for our Friends Lord God of Heaven,
preserve them, defend them,
deliver and restore them unto us again.
For they that held them in Bondage
Requir’d of them to take up Arms
against their Brethren.
Forbid it, Lord God, that those
who have sucked Bostonian Breasts
should thirst for American Blood.

BILLINGS:  JEREMIAH 3:21
A voice was heard in Roxbury
which echo’d thro’ the Continent,
weeping for Boston
because of their Danger.

BILLINGS:  JEREMIAH 31:20
Is Boston my dear Town,
is it my native Place?
for since their Calamity
I do earnestly remember it still.

BILLINGS:  PSALM 137:5-6
If I forget thee, yea,
if I do not remember thee,
Then let my numbers cease to flow
Then be my Muse unkind,
Then let my Tongue forget to move
and ever be confin’d;

BILLINGS (from the hymn tune, “Jargon”):
Let horrid Jargon split the Air and rive my nerves asunder.
Let hateful discord greet my ear as terrible as Thunder.
Let harmony be banish’d hence and Consonance depart;
Let dissonance erect her throne and reign within my Heart.

Two other significant patriotic anthems by Billings, *Mourn, Mourn* and *Peace*, are
later patriotic works that show the continued use of texts assembled from various
sources. *Mourn, Mourn* contains texts from Joel 2:18-19, 21, 23 as well as original
texts. Within the biblical text, Billings substitutes “America” for “ye children of Zion” in
verse 23. Peace, Billings’s longest work, is a substantial structure comprised of a variety of textual sources including Deuteronomy 32:43, Isaiah 11:6-9, 49:23, Psalm 47:7, 97:1, 106:48, Luke 2:14, Revelation 11:15, a hymn text by Isaac Watts, and original prose. Despite the length of the work, Billings shows considerable ingenuity in his use of such varied texts without any significant alterations. The only mention of “America” occurs in a passage that Kroeger believes to be original text by Billings.

Such unapologetic alteration of biblical text would have been rather striking to Puritan listeners. McKay and Crawford note that Billings “approached Scripture with no more reverence than he showed for any other text,” a stance that would have been considered sacrilegious by the Puritan orthodoxy. Yet Billings’s impressive knowledge of the Bible and other religious texts suggest that he regarded scripture highly, although perhaps differently from strict Puritans, given the care and thoughtfulness he took when selecting texts for his anthems. Believing Billings’s approach to be an artistic rendering of the text, Beth Wagstrom proposes that Billings “reserved the right to alter texts or interpolate his own words if it better suited his creative spirit.” Taking into account Elizabeth Crist’s assertion “that resistance to tyranny was obedience to God,” Billings could have felt spiritually justified in his artistic and patriotic use of Biblical texts in his music even though those uses seem counter to Puritan tradition.

In contrast to the Revolutionary War, which brought a great deal of societal change in a relatively short period, singing schools brought gradual change over the
course of nearly a century. The first singing schools were established to reverse a
decline in congregational singing that had occurred throughout the seventeenth century.
However, as Kroeger explains, “the reformers of the 1720s were occupied principally
with eliminating noise and disorder from the sanctuary, not with the finer points of the
choral singing.” The state of congregational singing had become so deplorable by
1725 that the Reverend Thomas Walter offers this description of the cacophony in the
sanctuary:

For much time is taken up in shaking out these Turns and Quavers; and
besides, no two Men in the Congregation quaver alike, or together; which
sounds in the ears of a good judge, like Five hundred different Tunes
roared out at the same times.

The venomous debate appeared in attacks on the defenders of the oral tradition known
as the “Usual way” published by those promoting musical literacy and so-called
“Regular-Singing.” The practice of “lining-out,” wherein a Deacon would sing each line
of the Psalm and the congregation would repeat each line in response, was especially
problematic if the Deacon had difficulty “setting” the tune, or the congregation was
unable or unwilling to sing exactly what was sung to them, or both. The advocates for
“Regular-Singing” targeted their condemnation of “lining-out” as the main cause for the
degradation of congregational singing in the “Usual way.” McKay and Crawford
illustrate the fierceness of the debate with James Franklin’s sensational account of a
fictional deacon’s unfortunate singing published in The New England Courant in 1724:

I am credibly inform’d, that a certain Gentlewoman miscarry’d at the
ungrateful and yelling Noise of a Deacon in reading the first Line of a

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72 Thomas Walter, The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained (Boston: Printed for John Elliot,
1725), 4.
73 McKay and Crawford, William Billings of Boston, 10.
74 Buechner, Yankee Singing Schools, 7.
Psalm; and methinks if there were no other Argument against this practice (unless there were an absolute necessity for it) the Consideration of it’s [sic] being a Procurer of Abortion, might prevail with us to lay it aside.75

Despite the inflamed rhetoric, the motivation behind the creation of singing schools was simple: to teach the fundamentals of music literacy so congregations could sing together in time and on pitch.76

Although singing schools were created to address a need in the church, from their inception they were already out of the hands of the clergy and were always essentially civic entities.77 As Michael Broyles explains, “by the 1760s singing schools had become more social than religious.”78 Over the decades, singing schools became focused on providing training in music literacy to the youth in the church. Harriet Beecher Stowe describes the members of the Litchfield, Connecticut singing school:

There were generally seated the bloom of our young people, sparkling, modest and blushing girls on one side, with their ribbons and finery, making the place as blooming and lively as a flower garden, and fiery, forward, confident young men on the other.79

Serving as a communal function, singing schools provided an opportunity for boys and girls to socialize, which was a rare occurrence in Puritan society.80 Bruce Daniels gives an excerpt from a young man’s diary that indicates his overriding enthusiasm for the “social” aspect of singing schools:

I have no inclination for anything for I am almost sick of the world and were it not for the hope of going to singing-meeting tonight and indulging

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75 Quoted in McKay and Crawford, William Billings of Boston, 14.
77 Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 32.
78 Michael Broyles, Mavericks and Other Traditions in American Music (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 17.
79 Quoted in Buechner, Yankee Singing Schools, 96.
80 Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 33.
myself in some of the carnal delights of the flesh, such as kissing, squeezing, etc., I should surely leave it now.81

While this description is perhaps a bit fanciful, it nonetheless speaks to a separation in the secular activities of singing schools from the rigid morality associated with the Puritan religion.

Because the social amusements ran in tandem with the musical training in singing schools, a four- to six-week singing school class normally concluded with a “singing lecture.”82 This opportunity to perform had a motivating influence on the singers, whose desire to continue singing together led to the development of church choirs known as at the time as meetinghouse choirs.83 As the popularity of meetinghouse choirs increased throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, they were no longer limited just to the meetinghouse. Indeed, some singing school graduates established the first college choirs including The Musical Society of Yale College and the Singing Club at the University at Harvard.84 Other choir members wanted to increase the quality of their performances even further, eventually resulting in the formation of some of the first civic musical organizations in North America. One of the most well-known organizations of this time was formed from by members of a singing school class taught by Billings in Stoughton, Massachusetts in 1774.85 On November 7, 1786, several of the original forty-eight students formally organized the

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Stoughton Music Society, a group that still exists today and is one of the oldest music organizations in America.86

As a meetinghouse choir became established in a community, it participated in both church and municipal events. Buechner explains:

The titles of the odes, set-pieces, and anthems are of particular interest because they reveal the many ways in which the choirs enhanced the religious and civic observances of their respective communities. Odes for dedications and ordinations, set-pieces for Election Day and Independence Day; and anthems for Thanksgiving, greater or lesser numbers in almost all of the important tune books were written by the singing master-composers.87

Billings composed several works that fit this description, and in addition to those that address recurring holidays he also composed occasional works commemorating particular events. For example, the funeral anthem, *Samuel the Priest*, was written for the funeral on January 2, 1784 of Rev. Samuel Cooper, pastor of Brattle Street Church in Boston, and was later printed in *The Suffolk Harmony*. As mentioned previously, the anthem *I Was Glad* was composed to celebrate the installation of the organ at First Church of Boston on March 13, 1785.88

The specific circumstances of the first performance of *Peace*, the anthem Billings composed to celebrate American victory in the Revolutionary War, are not fully known. The only extant print includes a handwritten inscription, “Ladd’s. Newport. August 1783;” McKay and Crawford suggest this indicates the date of publication of the pamphlet on which *Peace* was printed.89 In the introduction to her edition of the score, Gillian Anderson claims that the anthem’s text “portrays the jubilation of the American people

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87 Buechner, *Yankee Singing Schools*, 98.
89 Ibid., 133.
at the successful conclusion of the War for Independence” and that the work was performed in Newport, Rhode Island some time in 1783.\textsuperscript{90} The anthem, \textit{Peace}, remains Billings’s singular extant work composed specifically for the celebration of the war’s end.\textsuperscript{91}

The occasional nature of \textit{Peace}, indicates that the anthem would have likely been performed at a civic ceremony or potentially in a church service dedicated to thanking God for victory in the war. Regardless whether the performance was in the context of a worship service or some other occasion, a piece with a nationalistic text focused on specific worldly concerns would not have been considered appropriate in orthodox Puritan worship. Moreover, the length and difficulty of the work combined with the fact it includes untexted passages that could only be played by a “symphony” suggests that \textit{Peace} would not have been within the ability of any full congregation to perform. In all likelihood a meetinghouse choir of trained singers accompanied by trained instrumentalists would have performed it. Of all Billings’s anthems, \textit{Peace} in many ways best reflects the political influence of the Revolutionary War and the artistic influence of the meetinghouse choirs, themselves made possible by the singing schools, factors that in combination provided the foundation and justification for Billings’s departure from the Puritan musical tradition.


\textsuperscript{91} David Stowe puts forth the erroneous notion that Billings composed two works for the occasion of the end of the war: \textit{Anthem: Independence}, which was performed as a part of the festivities in Newburgh, New York, and \textit{Anthem: Peace}, which Stowe postulates was possibly performed somewhere in Rhode Island “within a month of Salem’s Day of Thanksgiving.” Because \textit{Independence} was published in \textit{The Singing Master’s Assistant} in 1778, five years prior to the conclusion of the war, it could not have been composed to celebrate the end of the war. David W. Stowe, \textit{How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 50-51; Billings, \textit{Complete Works}, 2:244-255.
The manner in which Billings’s music contrasts with the Puritan musical ideal clearly demonstrates his role in the transition from ritual to art in the music of eighteenth-century New England. The tenets of Puritan worship included the restriction that music should serve primarily as a form of communal prayer for the congregation and in a secondary capacity to assist in biblical instruction. The theological beliefs of Jean Calvin provided the foundation not only of how the music was to be used in Puritan worship but also of its character as fundamentally distinct from the liturgical music of the Lutheran and Catholic churches. For Calvin, music of a simple nature was intended to aid in the understanding of the texts sung by a congregation through the elimination any qualities that might prove to be distracting. Calvin’s view of music was fully congruent with the Puritan belief that worship was to be humble, genuine, and free of decoration.

Of the tenets of the Puritan musical tradition, Billings continued to set texts in the vernacular, because he shared Calvin’s belief in the paramount importance of the text to the singer. Billings’s stylistic independence from Puritan orthodoxy began with a differing ideology concerning the purpose of music: whereas Calvin believed music merely provided a means for the communal deliverance of biblical text, Billings recognized music for its inherent aesthetic worth. Additionally, Billings’s conception of the musical experience divided it into two roles: one passive and one active. Although Calvin wanted the entire congregation to be active in its participation in music, Billings
challenged that notion by suggesting that the active performer could also imply a passive listener, thereby separating the congregation into choir and audience.

The introduction of the meetinghouse choir – first members of singing schools who were eventually included in colonial Puritan worship as a select group of singers drawn from the congregation – provided Billings an opportunity to compose for trained singers. Consequently, Billings’s musical output shows a trend toward more elaborate musical material that would have been significantly beyond the limit of the full congregation’s ability. Moreover, Billings’s selection of texts, especially in his anthems, was not limited to the Psalms, reflecting his belief in artistic freedom from Puritan restrictions. Although Billings called for instruments in only three works, doing so contradicts the tenets of a Puritan musical culture that had banned any use of instrumental accompaniment for over two centuries.

Billings’s shift away from the Puritan musical heritage occurred simultaneously with considerable change in New England in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The independence of the colonies from Britain brought substantial turbulence to New England society. A number of Billings’s works depict the events of the Revolutionary War, frequently adapting scriptural texts for nationalistic purposes. The composition of occasional works to commemorate religious and civic events reflects both the increase in society’s approval of choral music beyond its nominal use in worship, both in singing schools and in choirs. For Billings, the transition from ritual to art was more than the creation of a distinct musical style. Indeed, although he was trained in tanning leather, Billings’s decision to list his occupation as “musician” in The Boston Directory of 1789 speaks to his desire to assume a role that did not exist in the
Puritan epistemology. With his newfound independence from Puritan ritual, Billings seems to have declared himself one of the United States of America's first musical artists.

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REFERENCE LIST


