

## Early Church Music in Colonial New England

Music is present in almost every culture for many purposes, though its role in religious ceremonies and services is arguably music's most prominent use throughout history.<sup>1</sup> In biblical times, King David (c.1040-c.970 BCE) "told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their fellow Levites as musicians to make a joyful sound with musical instruments: lyres, harps, and cymbals."<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul (c.5-66 AD) wrote in his letter to the early church of Colossae to "let the message of Christ dwell among [them] richly as [they] teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in [their] hearts."<sup>3</sup> The medieval Catholic Church continued the practices of the early Christian church, maintaining a primary focus on music in their services, developing liturgy and Gregorian Chants. The Reformation evolved church music even further, including the Lutheran hymns and extravagant Catholic masses.<sup>4</sup> Buddhist monks believe that peaceful and harmonious music brings beings to a fuller state of enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Hindustani hymns (Samaveda) are sung and chanted during services by Hindu priests.<sup>6</sup> Native American tribes used music and dance during their religious ceremonies to "gain physical and spiritual sustenance."<sup>7</sup>

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1. Edward Dickenson, *Music in the History of the Western Church: With an Introduction on Religious Music Among the Primitive and Ancient Peoples*, (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1902), vii.

2. 1 Chron. 15:16 (New International Version)

3. Col. 3:16 (NIV)

4. Edward Dickenson, *Music in the History of the Western Church: With an Introduction on Religious Music Among the Primitive and Ancient Peoples*, (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1902), 70.

5. Vakil and Aziz, "Buddhist Sacred Music," *Sacred Music Radio: Peace Through Music*, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://sacredmusicradio.org/buddhist-sacred-music/>.

6. Vakil and Aziz, "Hindu Sacred Music," *Sacred Music Radio: Peace Through Music*, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://sacredmusicradio.org/hindu-sacred-music/>.

7. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 14.

During the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, a small band of English Protestants came to the New World in search of religious freedom in their worship, but along with them came the centuries of European musical traditions.<sup>8</sup> These traditions were impossible to disregard during their search for newfound freedom and independence. However, early Americans were committed to reestablishing freedom in all areas of their lives, including religious, political, social, and economical freedom. It is through this assertion of individualism that the American spirit was born, including a new branch of church music. This paper will discuss the Colonial Americans' establishment of 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century New England church music and how they sought to disassociate themselves from the European musical traditions in search of their new identity through religious freedom and the development of their own style.

The European Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) occurred as a separation from the Roman Catholic Church believing that theological authority ought to belong to the Holy Bible and not to the church priests.<sup>9</sup> The European Protestants formed new religious sects, including the Church of England, the Lutheran Church, and the Calvinists. Historical cycles repeat themselves however, and even with the Protestants' newfound freedom, the Church of England began establishing control of their congregations, much like the Roman Catholics. A small group of Pilgrims decided to separate themselves from the Church of England and make the treacherous transatlantic voyage to America in 1620 to establish a new form of religious freedom. The Puritans joined them shortly after, not in an effort to separate themselves from the Church of England, but in an effort to further reform and purify the Anglican Church.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Ibid., 16.

9. Ibid., 20.

10. Andrew Delbanco, "Puritanism," *History.com*, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.history.com/topics/puritanism>.

Since the Puritans desired to further reform the English Church, they judged themselves, and therefore others, harshly, in an effort to accomplish their core belief: “human beings are inherently sinful creatures living in a world created by an all-virtuous God.”<sup>11</sup> The Calvinists, reformed Pilgrims, maintained John Calvin’s Reformation theology, desiring to remain close to God through intellect and the understanding of Scripture. Given that the Colonial American Calvinists based their decisions upon the authority of Scripture, it follows that they preferred church music with theologically accurate text and not upon a feeling or emotion produced by said music.<sup>12</sup> Their early church buildings were a far cry from the opulent European cathedrals, often meeting in homes or small multi-use meeting spaces, but they had freedom to teach, learn, and worship as they saw fit, which was worth far more to the Colonial Americans than grandeur and fortune. Though far from complete, they were making progress in distancing themselves from European religious practices.

American music has always been hard to define, since it is directly derived from and difficult to disassociate from the European tradition. From the beginning, Americans have worked and toiled to balance “the tension between two fundamental ideologies which drive America’s politics and culture: individualism and egalitarianism.”<sup>13</sup> To understand American worship, one must first examine early European church music. The worship within the Roman Catholic Church was so spectacular and majestic that it was almost mystical.<sup>14</sup> It was a

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11. Richard Crawford, *America’s Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 29.

12. *Ibid.*, 30.

13. William Brooks, *Music in America: An Overview (Part 1)*, (London, Cambridge University Press, 2016), 30.

14. Edward Dickenson, *Music in the History of the Western Church: With an Introduction on Religious Music Among the Primitive and Ancient Peoples*, (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1902), 70.

systematic and prescribed liturgy, utilized throughout the world, giving it an “aura of timeless dignity,” not to mention its practicality.<sup>15</sup> Given its elaborate art music status, lavish budgets, and sizeable staff of professional musicians, the liturgical Mass was something to be admired. Concurrently, the Anglican Church of England was using hymnody as their primary source for worship, with many hymns rewritten with current popular tunes.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, the early settlers brought two hymnbooks with them on their transatlantic voyage. The Puritans sang from *The Whole Booke of Psalmes, Collected into Englishe Meter* (published in 1562) and the Pilgrims worshipped from *The Book of Englishe Psalmes: Englished both in Prose and Meter* (also called *The Ainsworth Psalter*, published in 1612).<sup>17</sup> Though English hymns was “spare and plain,”<sup>18</sup> they provided the foundation upon which to build, as well as most likely the comfort of something familiar while the early Americans were discovering and establishing their own music.<sup>19</sup>

The original Psalters were written for literate European worshippers.<sup>20</sup> However, by the 1640s, whether the Colonial worshipper was too busy working to learn to read text or music, or did not possess necessary funds to buy the hymnal, many early Americans could not sing from a Psalter. Instead a lead singer would sing out the hymns, line by line, and have the congregation

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15. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 17.

16. Harold Chaney, Charles Don Keyes, and Arnold Klukas, “Introduction to the Anglican Musical Tradition,” *The Anglican Musical Tradition*, last modified March 8, 2008, <http://sacredmusicamerica.com/harmony/episcopal.html>.

17. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 22-23.

18. *Ibid.*, 22.

19. Philip Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92.

20. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 25.

sing back, a process called “lining-out.”<sup>21</sup> Worship instrumentation was rare, due to the cost of building and transporting an organ from Europe, as well as the struggle to find a reasonably accomplished musician to accompany services.<sup>22</sup> The acapella “lining-out” form of worship became known as “the Old Way” of singing and was popular until the 1720s, when Thomas Symmes, a local pastor in Boston, spoke out about the lack of pitch, tone, and congregational ability to learn the songs as originally written and intended.<sup>23</sup> Symmes recommended a new form of singing, “Regular Singing,” placing the authority of the music back on the notated score and not with the lining-out song leader.<sup>24</sup> This new process began a “singing reform that was to reshape New England psalmody” through the formation of singing schools and private music lessons, focused on learning the structure of Western music, albeit from a European perspective.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as Americans gradually acquired skills of their own, a greater sense of independence emerged, and Americans began establishing a new foundation for musical study.<sup>26</sup>

American music cannot be adequately discussed or defined without an understanding of the European tradition music. Nonetheless, Colonials took seriously their search for both a new identity and a fresh freedom of religious worship. Interestingly, the process begun almost 400 years ago still persists in the American Christian church today, between intellectual and emotional worship experiences, between traditional hymnals and contemporary high-definition projectors, and the continual development of style. Yet, America still embraces the journey as we search for “liberty and justice for all.”

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21. Ibid., 25.

22. Ibid., 50.

23. Ibid., 25-26.

24. Ibid., 26.

25. Ibid., 28.

26. Ibid., 28.

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