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

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I hear America singing, the caged bird
sings.

—Walt Whitman

Leaves of Grass

Prologue

Until the 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 latter nineteenth century that 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. Theirs and their culture became a minority, and, in many respects, an unfortunate footnote in American music history. For a detailed account of this true American music see Daniel Kingman, American Music: A Panorama, and “Native Pioneers” in Gilbert Chase’s American Music. 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 freedoms, but, in doing so, they helped create a narrowly focused view of choral music, which took musical form and culture. In a penetrating study, The Anthems in England and America by Elwyn A. Wienand and Robert H. Young, the authors point out:

Anxiety also characterized Puritan religious musical expression. 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 seen in unison without accomplishment, and nothing more.

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 Psalms-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.

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, America established a more solid, humanized social identity, and it is here where the true “art music” had its foundation. The European influence continued to dominate the music, but because American composers were the 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 “amateur tunesmiths,” as labeled by H. Wiley Hitchcock, because they did not have the cultural development and training of professional European counterpart. Some of the early American composers whose music remains modestly present in today’s choral repertoire include:

William Billings (1746–1800)

Elkanah Kelsay Dare (1782–1826)

Jacob French (1754–1817)

Christian Gregor (1724–1801)

Viri K. Hill (1862–1875)

Oliver Holden (1765–1844)

Jeremiah Ingalls (1764–1838)

Stephen Jenks (1772–1856)

Justin Morgan (1747–1778)

Catherine Olmstead (1759–1849)

Daniel Read (1757–1856), and

Timothy Swan (1759–1842)

They had professions other than music. For example, Supply Belcher was a tavern keeper, William Billings a tailor, Oliver Holden, a carpenter; Justin Morgan, a horse breeder; and Daniel Read, a comb maker. Their music is available in performance editions because of the research and efforts of musicians in the last half of the twentieth century such as Leonard Van Camp. Irving Lowens, Lawrence Benson, and Kurt Stone.

Today it is William Billings whose music is the greatest example of performance, and he has become a standard representative for music of this period. Nearly every year 2000 and the 200th anniversary of his death, and choral works such as Chester, A Virgin Unspotted, David’s Lamentation, Effigy at the Base of Sharon, and The Lord Is Risen 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, was fuguing tunes, unorthodox voice leading, and effort of musicians in the last half of the work by an American to be performed at the famous Three Choirs Festival in Worcester, England. This resulted in commissions for prestigious English choral festivals and the acceptance of an American compositional school by the international community.

Farther’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 (1892–1999), Quincy Porter (1874–1947), and the quintessential Charles Ives (1874–1954), indirectly makes him the father of twentieth-century American choral music. Parker, and to a somewhat lesser degree Piston, are considered the leaders of that period, and through their teaching, compositions, and choral works have become more than just the work of American choral music. These choral works will be most recognized. Erik Rutland钓鱼

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

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the more active denominations produced some music of the twentieth century, there was a steady increase in the quality level of American church music. The rise of choral music at the end of that century.

Music in America, backbones of growth.

In his lifetime. Wienandt and Young suggested that Parker’s music was more depth and individuality than others of his generation or before. His ability to write choral music at the end of that century.

Evolution in the development and advancement of the time. His vital gift, however, was the organ. According to Irving Lowens.

As late as 1714, when much discussion was an organ reported three earlier by Thomas Beale was installed in Boston’s King’s Chapel, an organist had to be brought from England to play skillfully thereon with a bond.

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. Bradford (1716-1809), George Kingsley (1817-1833); Joseph F. Holbrook (1822-1888), Thomas Hastings (1784-1872), and George K. Jackson (1745-1823).

In the first half of the century, European music continued to abound in America, and other professional musical venues, but American church music flourished. Anthems and hymns were among 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.

The word may be followed back to various forms of Antiphon, a term denoting a category of plainsong written and sung both as a part of liturgy. Group singing in worship serves in both capacities, and, for most people, the blending of these functions has been beneficial.

The rise of chorale music in America owes much to congregational singing. Congregational response has long been a feature of worship, and a variety of chorale has been a vital part in the development of choral music, especially in America.
Black spirituals, white spirituals, and gospel song

In the South, hymnody progressed in different directions. Folk hymnody was a natural development that had been 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 assembled 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 (1820),\(^{31}\) Amasias Davies, Kentucky Harmony (1816),\(^{32}\) William Waller, Southern Harmony,\(^{33}\) B.F. White and E.J. King, Sacred Harp.\(^{34}\)

Black spirituals were transmitted through the Moravian tradition. The first black college, Fisk University, began in 1869. A group of student singers known as The Jubilee Singers toured America, Europe, and other countries in the 1870s and 1880s. They were responsible for spreading the knowledge of African American music. This style of hymnody grew out of the influence of the Black Spirituals. The gospel song was, as Routley indicates, a "modern" spiritual.\(^{35}\)

Musical literacy influences

Two important early writers were Thomas Walter (1696–1725) and John Tufts (1689–1750). Walter’s pioneer book of instruction, The Gramm and Rules of Musick Explained (1721), tried to provide rules and methods for sight-reading and chorusing. Tufts: An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes in a Plain and Easy Method was also available in 1721, and Tufts constructed a chorister for use instead of notes.\(^{36}\)

Throughout the eighteenth century, singing societies became popular. Church choirs, however, the inclusion of secular tunes became more common. William Billings, the most famous early American composer, produced six tune books containing the religious and secular songs he had found in his anthems. Other notable musical missionaries who contributed to the spread of musical education were Low-ell Mason (1752–1827), Thomas Hastings (1754–1837), and Virgin C. Taylor (1817–1891). Virgil C. Taylor

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. The three streams can be described as: (1) the New England Style; (2) the Southern Folk Hymn (or The Spiritual) and (3) the Gospel Song.\(^{37}\)

The New England tradition of hymnody was an outgrowth of Psalm singing, especially linked to the Scottish Psalter and the Amosvorth Psalter. America’s first printed music book, the Fitch’s Psalms Book, did not attempt to replace these 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 the latter can be seen as an endemic factor in the development of 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, the first professional choirmaster in the meeting houses, congregational members grew musically proficient and sought out music recognition; eventually, people with training sat and performed together in the church’s gallery, thus calling the choir loft.

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 singing of music clubs. Other important developments such as the Stoughton Musical Society developed by 1786 and Boston’s Faneuil Hall and Massachusetts Musical Society, which began in 1814, did much to stimulate interest in choral music. Often competitive among themselves, these organizations were held, which encouraged improvements in quality.

In the nineteenth century, conventions and fairs were held, and they helped provide a forum for choral-singing groups. For example, the Meditator of Columbia, a journal published in 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; 1870, Northwestern University, founded the Northwestern A Cappella Choir.40 Probably the earliest official ensemble was the University Choral Union of the University of Michigan in 1878. Northwestern University, in 1896, was the first college to have a “cappella” choir—Peter Lubkin, director, the music school at Northwestern University, founded the Northwestern A Cappella Choir.

Availability of music was another 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 printed music in New England, and the 1761 James Lyon collection Union, which was the first published setting of Psalms and hymns by a native-born American. Lyon was also active in the establishment of subscription concerts in Philadelphia, and in other early musical ventures. John S. Dwight (1813–1895) was not a composer, but his work in advancing standards of music education was important. He was America’s first music critic and editor of the first significant musical journal, Dwight’s Journal of Music (1852–1881).
Opera and instrumental music also influenced 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 an international citizenry. 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 1870 subscription concerts had begun in Philadelph ia, New York City, and Chicago. It was common for orchestras (and opera singers) from Europe to tour in the United States, perpetuating the high standards set by recognized European composers.

Theodore Thomas (1833–1905) was an avid young conductor who did much to advance the professional American orchestra. His Theodore Thomas Orchestra, founded in 1862, toured for several seasons in Chicago. Thomas’s orchestra gained a permanent home and evolved into the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. His pioneering helped encourage the formation of major professional orchestras, and before 1900 there were orchestras in St. Louis, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other large cities. Most relied heavily on benefactors who subsidized them financially. Western audiences were slow. Even 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.

Opera also depended on the contribution of patrons. The public in the nineteenth century had come to opera from a background in minstrelsy, so cultivation of the audience was slow. Even today opera remains a genre that has less universal appeal than many other musical forms. By the middle of the century, however, there were major opera performances. They brought European performers to the States, which helped develop an established American choral music. In comparison with other major musical genres such as orchestral, chamber, or opera music, the number of composers who write in this medium remains limited. Cost, technical requirements, and available performance venues are restrictive factors that have not successfully contributed to a corresponding growth in 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 development and evolution of American choral music. There certainly were many important events that could be pursued in a discussion of this type, but space does not permit a more detailed story. America is a blend of heterogeneous cultures, and throughout the entirety of the nation’s history, people from other places have come to the central part of the States. They brought with them their religious beliefs and social customs, which in turn influenced the art form. The collection of the two main forces (sacred/secular) will continue to be an essential part of their lives. There are many aspects of choral music that continue to be an important part of our American heritage.

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