

William Billings – American Composer
By Hill Grimmett
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This is the first of a series of brief biographical and musical sketches of some of the composers we all know and love in *The Sacred Harp*.

William Billings (1746-1800) is perhaps the best known of the early American composers. He was born into a family of tradesmen in Boston, and is said by some to have been self-taught in music. Other sources claim he studied music with a local choir-master from a young age, and learned from William Tansur's *Musical Grammar* and various psalm books.

All accounts agree, however, that he was remarkably unattractive: Nathaniel D. Gould, writing years after his death in 1853, says "Billings was somewhat deformed in person, blind with one eye, one leg shorter than the other, one arm somewhat withered, with a mind as eccentric as his person was deformed. To say nothing of the deformity of his habits; suffice it to say, he had a propensity for taking snuff that may seem almost incredible...."

And in a letter to composers Lowell Mason and G.J. Webb, John Pierce said in an 1839 letter, "Never have I heard a louder, harsher, or more inharmonious singer. I have sung with him, agreeably to the fashion of the times, with all my might, without being conscious, that I enunciated a sound, so completely was my utterance drowned by his overpowering screams."

Billings' output was prodigious, and his *New England Psalm-Singer*, published in 1770, was the first book of music published in America composed wholly by an American. Using rhythmic poetry by Isaac Watts as well as his own compositions, Billings was instrumental in moving the sacred music of his time away from a near-exclusive reliance on setting the Psalms to music.

His works included:

- The New-England Psalm-Singer (1770)
- The Singing Master's Assistant (1778)
- Music in Miniature (1779)
- The Psalm-Singer's Amusement (1781)
- The Suffolk Harmony (1786)
- The Continental Harmony (1794)

The Old Stoughton Musical Society, formed in Stoughton about 15 miles southwest of Boston in 1786, is the oldest choral performing organization in the United States. They have been singing Billings' compositions since the Society was founded and their archives contain a record of Billings himself teaching a singing school in Stoughton as early as 1774.

Billings' music was enormously popular during his lifetime, and he was famous as the composer of the defiant Revolutionary War hymn "Chester", which in its original setting began with a verse no longer included in *The Sacred Harp* –

Let Tyrants shake their iron rod,
And slavery clank its galling chains.
We fear them not – we trust in God!
New England's God for ever reigns.

Despite his popularity, and the sales of his many books, Billings continued to support himself and his family as a tanner, and later as a civil servant. This was common in the time, because the earnings of the itinerant "singing masters" in New England were inadequate to support them, certainly if they had a family, as Billings did. (He was survived by six of his children.)

Billings often included his own notes and instructions in his hymn books, and had this to say about the appropriate balance of voices:

“Suppose a company of forty people, twenty of them should sing the bass, and the other twenty should be divided according to the discretion of the company into the upper parts. Six or seven voices should sing the ground bass (*i.e. an octave below what is written –HG*), which sung together with the upper parts, is most majestic, and so exceeding grand as to cause the floor to tremble, as I myself have often experienced. Much caution should also be used in singing a solo (*sic*); in my opinion 2 or 3 at most are enough to sing it well. It should be sung as an echo, in order to keep the hearers in agreeable suspense till all the parts join together in a full chorus, as sweet and strong as possible.”

I'll let that stand as the last word. If you want to learn more about Billings, and see some interesting commentary about him in the decades after his death, visit –
<http://www.nationwide.net/~amaranth/billings.htm>