



Hallelujah!



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Rural Sacred Choral Music of Post-Colonial America

by Richard Stanislaw

Note: The following is the last offering from Richard Stanislaw as editor of the Hallelujah! column. He started in this position in 2010, and, along with editing this column, he has been a unique and helpful voice on the Choral Journal editorial board assisting with article reviews and other items.

In the years immediately following the American Revolution, urban art music in our young country turned increasingly toward Europe for inspiration. In those same years, the rural areas and growing frontiers preserved a distinctly American style of singing. Choral societies, for example, performed Handel and Haydn in Boston and honored Mendelssohn in New York. Philadelphia developed a resident orchestra, and Charleston opened an opera repertoire theatre. An imitative sophistication set in—a sophistication that was embarrassed by American idioms. City churches began programs of cultural upgrading, often to the exclusion of familiar local hymnody and colonial Psalmody. America had become independent, and her choral directors in the cities felt a conscious need to demonstrate European-style maturity. The sturdy music of New

England traveling singing school teachers and their tune books was forgotten or intentionally purged.

Only about one American in sixteen lived in cities during the early nineteenth century. Singing schools that had been the backbone of church music and choral singing now shifted to serve rural and developing areas of Kentucky and Tennessee, Ohio, and western Pennsylvania. Musical style in those schools was deliberately anti-European. Even the four-syllable four-shape method of instruction was a unique (and effective) system, with its three-voice design, gapped scales, open fifths, and consonant fourths. Around this same time, revivals were sweeping the rural south and west. Methodists Francis Asbury and Peter Cartwright, Presbyterian maverick Barton Stone, and hundreds of now-forgotten circuit-riding ministers penetrated frontier life. The visible aspect of revival was the camp meeting. Rural folk with varying levels of Christian commitment traveled from miles around to gather for preaching and singing. The camp meetings were a weekend social and musical event.

Sometimes secular songs had a few important words modified to turn worldly values heavenly. Or, new texts were written to promote a particular idea, as in this hymn, cheerfully sung to an English folk tune:

David B. Mintz, *Spiritual Song Book*,
Halifax, N.C., 1805

*I am a soldier of the cross,
I count all earthly things but dross:
My soul is bound for endless rest,
I'll never leave the Methodist.*

...

*The world, the Devil and Tom Pain
Have try'd their best, but all's in vain;
They can't prevail; the reason's this:
The Lord defends the Methodist.*

The revivals were used most successfully by the Methodists, but they had begun among more staid denominations. Richard McNemar was a Presbyterian who later turned Quaker. Speaking of Presbyterian reaction to the free spirit in the camp meetings, he wrote harsh words:

The people among whom the



revival began, were generally Calvinists; and although they had been long praying in words, for the outpouring of the Spirit; and believed that God had “fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass”; yet, when it came to pass that their prayer was answered, ...they rose up and quarreled with the work because it did not come to pass that the subjects of it were willing to adapt their soul-stupefying creed.¹

The camp meetings first used small song books containing only texts. The tune was “lined out,” the leader singing a single line and the group answering. Here is the account of one itinerant musician who later published some of the tunes:

An old man...gives out the hymn, of which the whole assembled multitude can recite the words—and an air, in which every Voice can join. We should deem poorly of the heart, that would not thrill, as the song is heard, like the ‘sound of many waters’ echoing among the hills and mountains.²

contain the people the camp was exlenonined by candles furnished by the congregation which was in a thick grove of beach timber the appearance of itselfe gave a solem appearance but ad to that preaching exorting singing praying sinors rejoicing publickly.

Although this revivalist music later became the content of singing school books, the first use of folk hymns and spirituals was informal. A New England Congregationalist, who was part of an already well-developed more formal liturgical tradition, observed this about the revivalist groups:

That technique of lining out led to the call-and-answer style of many black and white spirituals. The camp meetings were integrated pre-Civil War events. Indeed, theological discussions about Christian brothers and sisters who were slaves led many into an abolitionist understanding, a beneficial side-effect of the setting and the shared music.

Diaries and biographies from this era tell of the spirited singing—from the tents, between services, among small groups, and most particularly at the evening services. Thousands gathered in an open area to sing. Some brought candles, but most meetings were lit by fires built on platforms around the group. Col. Robert Patterson, in a letter dated 1801, speaks of 4,000-8,000 people attending a camp meeting in “Estern Kentuckeye”:

The meeting houses could not

The Methodist, and the strict Presbyterian, have no separate choirs. They have not yet succeeded so far in the division of spiritual labor, as to delegate to others the business of praise, or to worship God by proxy. I have often witnessed a congregation of one thousand Methodists, as they rose simultaneously from their seats, and following the officiating minister, who gave out the hymn in portions of two lines, joined all together in some simple air, which expressed the very soul of natural music. I could see no lips closed as far as I could direct my vision, nor could I hear one note of discord uttered... It did not offend me that they sang with all their might, and all their soul, and all their strength, for it was evident that they sang with all their heart.³

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Singing was a bedrock of revival activities—Hymns and Psalms that later found their way into widely circulated singing school books, those end-bound books of instruction and three or four-part harmony, such as *Sacred Harp*, *Southern Harmony*, and Lincoln’s favorite, *Missouri Harmony*. Even the titles emphasized the intent: learning to sing in harmony. Those books documented the new American part-song repertoire—often an old text married to a folk tune, “Amazing Grace” or “How Firm A Foundation,” for example. The books included fuguing tunes of New England, quaint new repertoire, and European hymns in Amer-

ican harmonic settings.

So, while American church music in urban areas was becoming increasingly dignified (that is, European), the rural majority kept colonial musical style alive and expanded it to include an enthusiastic repertoire of folk hymnody and part singing. Rural music was strongly associated with the second great revival. It was popular in developing western United States among people who were the primary movers in that century for civil liberty, human rights, and education.

It is that music that was written down by the new wave of singing teachers, the traveling proponents of

part singing. It was the music used in frontier singing schools, usually in the shape-note system, the community choirs of that day.

NOTES

¹ Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival* (Cincinnati, 1808).

² Timothy Flint, *Condensed Geography of the Western States* (Cincinnati, 1828).

³ Samuel Gilman, *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir* (Boston, 1829).



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