

Samuel Felsted of Jamaica

Editor's note. The revival of Samuel Felsted's *Jonah*, an eighteenth-century oratorio composed in Jamaica and published in London in 1775, is told in Sister Mary Dominic Ray's article "Six Tales that Wagged a Seventh" (*Sonneck Society Newsletter* 9 [Spring 1983], 25). In the early 1970s, Sister Dominic, then Director of the American Music Research Center at Dominican College, San Rafael, California, ordered and received a copy of the oratorio from the British Museum after reading Oscar Sonneck's brief account of it in *Early Concert Life in America*. Convinced of the work's merit, she enlisted Wilbur Russell and Thurston Dox to do simultaneous revivals of the work with their respective choral groups on the West and East Coast in 1980. Russell later used *Jonah*, the text translated into Chinese, with a Taiwanese group on a tour of Taiwan in 1981. In 1983, Sister Dominic and Dox raised sufficient funds to produce a Musical Heritage Society recording (MHS 48702). The American Music Research Center also awarded Dox a grant to find out more about the composer, for practically nothing was known about Felsted other than the indication on the title page of the score that he was organist at St. Andrew Parish Church in Jamaica. The article below, originally given as a paper at the Sonneck Society for American Music conference at Toronto in April, 1990, summarizes the results of Dox's research on Felsted's life. Within the next year, the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder will sponsor the publication of a performing edition of *Jonah*.

The most formidable challenge in pursuing information about Samuel Felsted's life in Jamaica is to convince a reader that three research trips could be made to this lovely island without including some time at a beach. Today we have a perception of Jamaica which our colonial ancestors certainly did not have. Jamaica's commercial and political relationship to the North American mainland was very close during the eighteenth century. Communication was constant and interest in the common welfare very keen, but the island was not perceived as a place to vacation. Deaths exceeded births by a wide margin. At one point during the early years of British rule, soldiers reportedly died at the rate of 140 a week, and those who survived refused to produce food in the hope that their commanders would be forced to return to England (Edwards 1819, 201-06).

With the eventual division of the island into parishes, Kingston and St. Andrew, near the magnificent natural harbor on the southern shore, became prominent. It was at The St. Andrew Parish Church, where Samuel Felsted was organist, that his oratorio *Jonah* was written and presumably performed sometime shortly before 1775, the year of its publication in London. The work is now recognized as the earliest known oratorio written in the New World.

Oscar Sonneck wrote about Felsted and *Jonah*, accounting for three performances in New York (1788, 1789, 1802) and one in Boston (2 December 1789), which was to have been given in the presence of George Washington during his inaugural visit to that city (Sonneck 1907, 202, 283). No other



H. West del. 1772

F. Bartolucci sculp.

JONAH AN ORATORIO
Designed for a VOICE and HARPSICORD:
COMPOSED BY
Samuel Felsted
ORGANIST OF ST. ANDREW'S
J A M A I C A.

Frontispiece for *Jonah*

eighteenth-century performances have been documented. The British Museum catalog entry: "In 1775 appeared *Jonah, an Oratorio Disposed for a Voice and Harpsichord*" might be construed as a reference to a performance as well as the publication. This citation appears in at least four standard reference books and as a marginal inked notation in Jamaican historian Frank Cundall's own copy of his *A Brief History of the Parish Church of St. Andrew, Jamaica* (Cundall, 1931,47). John Sullivan Dwight also knew of the work's existence. He made a passing remark about this "ancient work" in his *Journal of Music* (6 June 1857) inviting readers to submit any additional information they might have.

Newspapers no longer exist that could, at least, give an announcement of the first Jamaican performance, and no other documentation has been discovered as yet. One might surmise that, in the Jamaica of that day (1775), where commerce, politics and the military were the dominating topics of interest, little opportunity for the refinements of cultured music existed. However, it seems unthinkable that a performance did not take place, given the size and distinction of the subscription list for the publication. Two hundred and thirteen individuals of station saw fit to underwrite costs of printing the score, including the governor and lieutenant governor. The wife of Lt. Governor John Dalling was the recipient of the dedication.

These subscribers, listed in the published score, came from every parish on the island and abroad. As testimony to the prominence of Jamaican subscribers in social and civic life, thirty were military officers, and twenty were, at various times, members of the Assembly, including Sir Charles Price, at one time its Speaker. The same number had held the office of Justice of the Peace, fifteen were attorneys and court judges, and another twenty were merchants and plantation owners. Several of the subscribers were listed as organists in various parish churches. Two subscribers outside of Jamaica are particularly significant, connecting Felsted with artistic life in England at the time: Benjamin West and Francesco Bartolozzi. West is doubtless the famous American painter who became President of England's Royal Academy of Arts in London and who also painted the cover picture for the score. Bartolozzi, Engraver to the King and acknowledged to be the greatest of the day, inscribed West's painting for publication.

Into what sort of social milieu was America's first oratorio born? In spite of its preoccupation with commercial life, culture did exist in eighteenth-century Jamaica. The earliest instrumental performance on record dates from 1730. Theatrical activity was in evidence by the year 1682, according to Richardson Wright's *Revels in Jamaica*, which covers the subject thoroughly and is, though limited to theatre, the only significant writing dealing with the arts in Jamaica before the turn of the eighteenth century (Wright, 1937, 6). Some historians characterize the general life style as quite amenable to entertainment and decidedly secular. Perhaps the most vibrant cultural life for colonial Jamaicans occurred during the throes of the American Revolution when the American Company of Comedians sought refuge on the island while war raged on the

So. M^{rs} Talling,
Madam,

Authors generally chuse Patrons, either from
Shin or virtue. - I suppose you not only on account of these, but
for your distinguished Talents in the Science of Music: It would
be unjust to you and your native Country, to pass over in si-
lence those Accomplishments that amiable Conduct, which procure
at you the Esteem and Love of all your acquaintance? -

To your Patronage I confess my particular obligations, for
the care attending the Public Performance of this little Piece,
which is submitted to the Censure of its Judges, as my first attempt
at Composition. -

Conscious of its Defects, I cannot but lament my inability
to offer a tribute more worthy your acceptance, for the Honor you
have conferred on:

Madam,

Your most obedient
& humble Servant,
Samuel Felsted.

Dedication for Jonah

mainland. Probably because of their presence and influence, over thirty concerts can be documented between 1780 and 1800, typically including both vocal and instrumental music, and followed by a ball. Programs often neglect to mention composers, but those that do contain the familiar names of Handel, Haydn, Stamitz, Pleyel, Abel, and Johann Christian Bach. Symphonies, overtures, concertos, excerpts from oratorios, airs and ensemble pieces were common fare.

A few other scattered indications of the quality of musical life have surfaced. In 1780, the *Royal Gazette* (Kingston) announced "Mr. Morgan will open an Academy for teaching music, particularly on the harpsichord and violin." Ads for the sale of harpsichords were common in the papers. Twenty-five organists can be accounted for, from Jeremiah Weishammer in 1724 at St. Andrew's to Eliza Aldred in 1831 at the same church. And young people were part of the church music program too, at least in Port Royal where, in 1804, the vestry minutes report that the organist received an additional twenty pounds a year for "his attendance at the singing of the parish children." The first known installation of a pipe organ was in 1706 at St. Andrew's.

Samuel Felsted's presence on the island is recorded as early as 1762 in a deed which shows him as a property owner at age nineteen. A baptismal record dated 1763 informs us he was baptized as an Anabaptist at age 20, making his birth year 1743. His parents were doubtless the William and Joyce Felsted (born Weaver) whose marriage took place in 1741 in Philadelphia (Christ Church, Philadelphia 1709-1800, 4101). William Felsted was an ironmonger, a hardware merchant, who apparently had come to Jamaica in the 1730s and made his way to Boston, setting up a business there in 1737. While Joyce's family background remains obscure, she and William may have met in Boston. On returning to Jamaica, they stopped in Philadelphia for the purpose of being married in the famous Christ's Church there.

A bill paid to William Felsted for goods purchased from him by the Vestry of Kingston, Jamaica, in 1742 is evidence that the Felsteds resided in Jamaica shortly after their marriage and leads to the all-important conclusion that Samuel Felsted must have been born there the following year. Kingston Vestry Minutes refer to William again in 1759 and several times thereafter. Tax rolls show the Felsted family as property owners in Kingston from 1759, and other extant public records, deeds, and wills account for twenty-two members of the extended family on the island up until the year 1840. One family member of note, Dr. John Felsted, brother of Samuel, lived in Philadelphia for a time.

In 1770, Samuel married Maria Laurence, the daughter of plantation owner Richard Laurence. Seven daughters and one son were born into the family. One of the daughters, Christiana, and the son, John Laurence, were also organists; Christiana succeeded her father as organist at St. Andrew's Parish Church for a period of ten years.

William, the father, was also a musician. Several musical instruments are mentioned in inventory found in his will. He served as organist for St. Andrew's during the 1760s, a fact which is humorously recalled by the poet and historian,

Largo

Chorus
of
NINEVITES

Have mercy Lord, and hear our plaintive cries, and hear our
 plaintive cries, and hear our cries, and hear our plaintive
 plaintive cries. Behold our
 tears. Behold our tears, and hear our plaintive plaintive cries.
 Behold our tears, and hear our plaintive plaintive cries.
 and hear our faint way.
 Nor let thy dreadful indignation see. Nor

"Chorus of Ninevites" from *Jonah*

Bryan Edwards, in his poem "A Church's Lamentation":

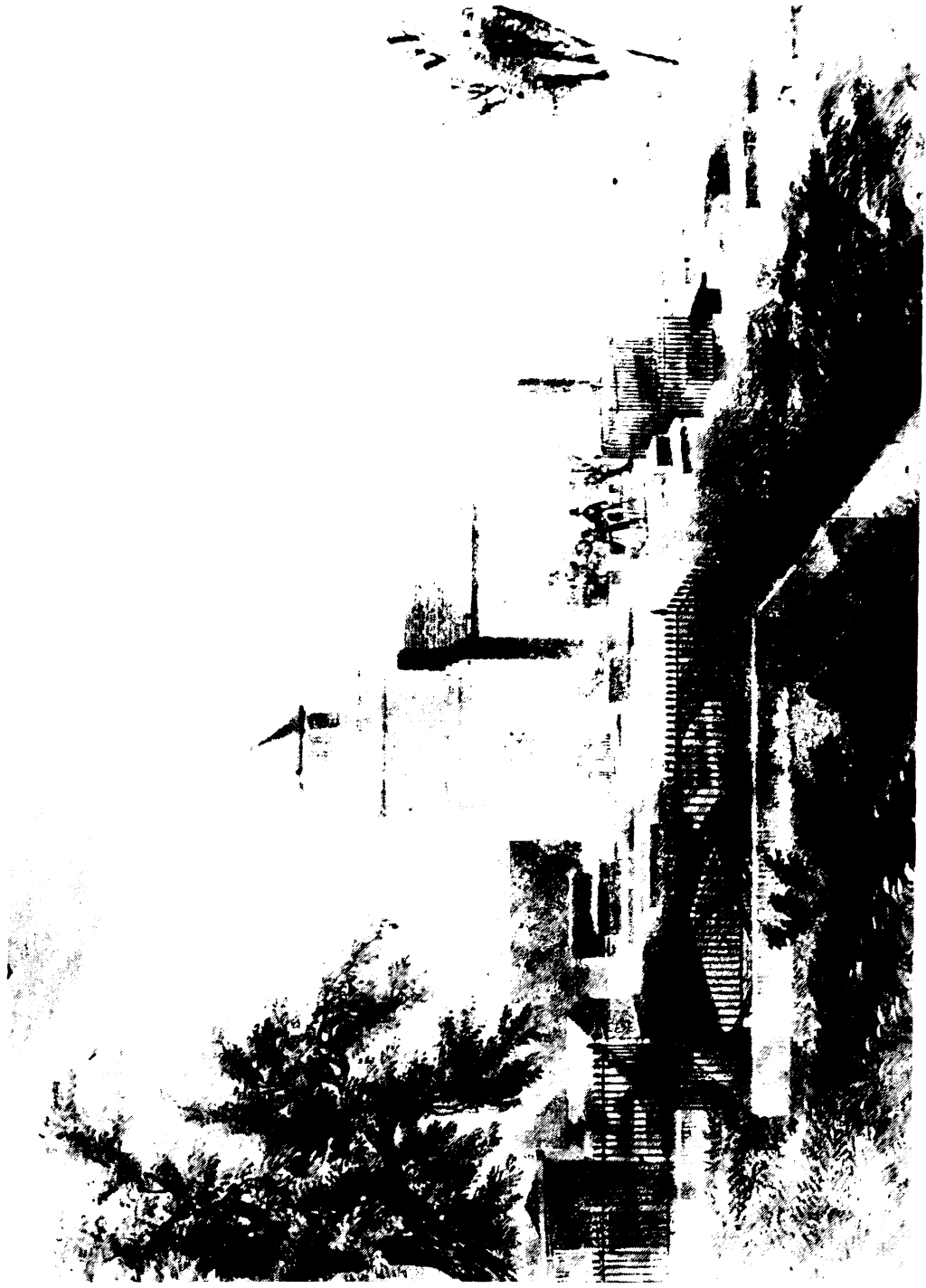
Well, we submit! Poor Felsted's dead
 And starves the worms he lately fed.
 But Death was sure in sad ill will,
 His good old caterer to kill;
 And has not din'd, I'm bold to say,
 On such short commons many a day (Edwards 1819, 47)

The question of Samuel Felsted's education and his musical study in particular is a critical one. Two schools existed on the island which he might have attended during his boyhood years. The most likely would have been Wolmer School in Kingston, where he lived—established in 1743 through the will of John Wolmer and still providing education today for the children of Kingston. The second possibility is a school known as Old Woman's Savannah, located some fifty miles from Kingston in the Parish of Clarendon, which was the only school in Jamaica at the time that accepted students from other parishes. The enrollment records of both schools for the period of Samuel's youth have, unfortunately, not been preserved.

The likelihood that Felsted was sent back to England or to the northern colonies for any portion of his education seems rather slim. His parents were not of the wealthy upper class accustomed to sending their sons abroad for their schooling. An examination of the records shows that he did not attend the Felsted School in Essex near London, Oxford University, or the Academy and College of Philadelphia.

The most convincing bit of information regarding the circumstances of Felsted's early education comes indirectly from an unexpected source. In 1771, Samuel Felsted was admitted to the newly-formed American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, to which Benjamin Franklin and other notable intellectuals of the day belonged. Felsted became one of four eighteenth-century Jamaicans to be received by this prestigious institution. In the document written in support of his application for membership, the following enlightening reference appears: "His education has been rather confined, but by great industry and force of native genius, he has recommended himself to the wise and learned of this island" (Smith 1771, 4101). Any schooling that Felsted had received other than in Jamaica would surely have been mentioned here. His musical education was probably administered during his formative years by his father and later probably by the venerable Daniel DeLuskie, who served as organist of the Kingston Parish Church for a period of forty-one years.

Felsted was not simply a musician. Dr. James Smith, a judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Kingston and author of the letter of support for membership in the American Philosophical Society cited above, mentioned Felsted's "merit in the three sister sciences, Poetry, Painting and Music, for which he has a natural genius." An interest in the natural sciences, especially botany, is evident in Felsted's decision to send his own drawings of different Jamaican butterflies along with his application for membership as evidence of his broad interests and



St. Andrew's Parish Church, Jamaica

pursuits. His prowess as an inventor comes to light in the detailed plan for a horizontal windmill designed to power Jamaican sugar mills, which he also submitted to the Society after becoming a member. Regarding poetry, there seems little doubt that he was the author of the libretto for *Jonah*. Finally, in 1949, a letter was received by the Library of the Institute of Jamaica in which a painting of a palatial residence in Kingston by one Samuel Felsted was offered for sale by a London bookstore, attesting to his abilities as a painter.

Truly, he was a man of the Enlightenment, but he was also a native-born British colonial who spent his life on the Island of Jamaica, probably earning his living as a private music teacher, tutor of children in general studies, manager of rental properties, and church musician. On the few occasions when he was called to be a juror, he was always listed as a "gentleman." Otherwise, he appears to have had no active life as a civil servant.

In his dedicatory remarks prefacing *Jonah*, Felsted refers to the work as "my first attempt at composition." Because of its quality and the composer's obvious talent, one assumes that Felsted continued to write music, perhaps lost to the violence of earthquake, hurricane and fire so common in Jamaica. One other work has survived, *Six Organ Voluntaries*, the set written and published after he became organist at the Kingston Parish Church in 1783. A published score can be found in the Bristol (England) Public Library. It comes from the private collection of a noted British organist. These voluntaries and *Jonah* are Felsted's only known works.

Most of the information that relates directly to Samuel Felsted has been found in sources on the Island. The two major repositories are the Institute of Jamaica Library in Kingston and the Jamaica Archives in Spanish Town. The Island Record Office, also in Spanish Town, contains documents dating as far back as 1664. In time, more pieces of Felsted's life may be joined. At least a cultured musical life in colonial Jamaica is apparent and Samuel Felsted and the Felsted family played a prominent role in it.

Recognition of Felsted's oratorio *Jonah* as being, without doubt, the first work of its kind composed in the New World has gained the attention of several noted members of the Jamaican musical community, among them Valarie Facey, publisher and leader in cultural and historical pursuits, and Pamela O'Gorman, former Director of the Jamaica School of Music. They, together with a large number of like-minded individuals, Kingston area musicians, and the local press arranged a performance of *Jonah* in the sanctuary of St. Andrew's Parish Church on November 26, 1990. Seven hundred people attended the concert, including academic and governmental dignitaries, representatives from foreign embassies, and myself and my wife by special invitation. The event was momentous in marking the return of the work to its place of origin after earlier performances and a recording in the United States. Emerging from two hundred years of obscurity, Samuel Felsted, a Jamaican composer of English heritage, can now take his place among other eighteenth-century composers who struggled to create a musical culture in the New World.

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