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## **The Church-Gallery Orchestra in New England**

One of the most prevalent notions about church music in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England is that it was composed for unaccompanied chorus. This idea seems irrefutably proven by the musical documents emanating from that time—over two hundred tunebooks containing what appears to be choral music, usually set for three or four voice parts. In the theoretical discussions that preface most of these tunebooks, the voices are identified as treble, counter, tenor and bass. From this evidence and the fact that a text is underlaid in the music, it seems undeniable that this is choral or, at least, vocal music. But are we justified in considering it unaccompanied?

It is true that in this music a separate part for accompanying instruments almost never appears, nor are figures added to the bass to imply an improvised keyboard accompaniment. But considerable evidence from other documents of the time shows that in many churches instruments, such as the flute, clarinet, bassoon, violin, viola and violoncello, were used to support the voices by doubling the vocal parts. Occasionally these instruments assumed a more independent role, playing over the tunes before the voices entered, and providing instrumental preludes, interludes and postludes to some of the pieces. At times, players may even have performed purely instrumental music at various points in the service.

The collection of instruments used in church was usually referred to as “the band.” In recent years the term gallery orchestra has been favored by scholars, because the choir in most late eighteenth-century New England Congregational churches occupied special seats in the gallery, or balcony, which usually ran around three sides of the meeting house.

The attitude of the Puritans, who founded the Congregational churches in New England, toward instrumental music in the church is too well known to need more than a brief mention here to set the scene. In England, during the mid-seventeenth century reign known as the Commonwealth, Puritans dismantled most of the organs, disbanded the choirs, and established unaccompanied congregational singing as the only acceptable form of church music.<sup>1</sup> While in England this simpler singing practice changed with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, it still prevailed in most New England churches for over a hundred more years. All the while, congregational singing had degenerated, allegedly through neglect and indifference, to an “odd noise”<sup>2</sup> and a “horrid Medley of confused and disorderly Noises,”<sup>3</sup> as described by several writers of the day.

Beginning in the 1720s, an attempt was made to arrest this perceived decline in singing by offering musical instruction in singing schools, so that the congregations, which had lost their ability to read music by note, could improve their performance by singing from a standard musical text. The campaign to reinstate “singing by rule” caused considerable controversy, and much ink was spilled in arguments on both sides of the question, but singing schools eventually won widespread acceptance. Modestly successful in improving singing, singing schools were also popular social institutions<sup>4</sup> and brought about some significant changes in attitudes toward music in general by the 1770s and 1780s.

Pressure from new musically educated singers led to the establishment of church choirs.<sup>5</sup> At first, this was conceived to be an expedient designed to lead and support congregational singing. If the singers could sit together, it was argued, they could better assist the singing. Little by little, however, the choir assumed an independent and, in some cases, a dominating role in the musical life of the church. They introduced part singing and a more lively music than the staid, old psalm-tunes of their predecessors, as well as more elaborate music, such as fusing-tunes, anthems, and set-pieces, designed for performance by trained singers rather than the congregation. In these pieces, with their quasi-independent and sometimes quite complex contrapuntal lines, a need for instrumental support appears to have arisen.

Not all singers were of equal ability, of course. New singers, fresh from the singing school, joined the choir at more or less regular intervals, while older singers frequently dropped out when they married. Thus the choir personnel changed constantly. Because it was the least demanding part, inexperienced singers were usually assigned to the counter part, but even this was likely to tax the abilities of a raw beginner with only a few weeks of singing school experience. The bass, the foundation of the musical texture, also needed support, if not in the actual performance of the notes, at least to help maintain the pitch of the tune. “The natural imbecility of the human voice,” as one writer characterized it,<sup>6</sup> caused the pitch to sink gradually, with resulting problems in range for the lower voices.

Thus, a real need existed for instrumental accompaniment. The solution hallowed by centuries of Western usage was to procure an organ to accompany both congregational and choir singing. A few prosperous congregations did this, but organs in America during the eighteenth century were both expensive and scarce.<sup>7</sup> Besides, in many of the more conservative churches, strong prejudices still existed against instruments of any kind in the meeting house, and the organ, with its massive case and majestic sound, was an abrogation of principle that was hard to overlook.

A simpler and, in some ways, more acceptable solution was to ask members of the congregation who had some proficiency on certain musical instruments to play along with the vocal parts to support and encourage them. As an example, let us follow this development in one church. The Reverend

William Bentley had struggled with music in his East Church in Salem, Massachusetts, for over a decade. A sensitive and articulate man, rather liberal in his outlook, Bentley enjoyed good music and placed a high value on it as a vehicle for religious instruction. His church had sponsored a number of singing schools over the years, and for short periods singing had improved, only to decline again to (for him) an intolerable level. With an air of resignation, he wrote in his diary on 28 October 1795:

Sent and purchased at Boston a Bass Viol [i.e., a cello] for 21 dollars. The fondness for instrumental music in churches so increases that the inclination cannot be resisted. I have applied to Mr. Gardner to assist the counter with his German flute.<sup>8</sup>

A few months later, the band of instruments was increased, as he recorded in his diary for 16 March 1796:

The violin for the first time was introduced last Sunday [i.e., 13 March]. We expect two German flutes and a Tenour-Viol in addition to our present Bass Viol.<sup>9</sup>

The first indication of an independent role for the instruments in Bentley's church occurred on 15 December 1796.<sup>10</sup> That was the date of the annual Thanksgiving Day service in Massachusetts, and in recording the order of service in his diary, Bentley noted that it opened and closed with instrumental music.

The Thanksgiving Day service the following year — 30 November 1797 — appears to have been an even more elaborate affair, attended by a more or less formal instrumental group from outside the congregation. In some detail, Bentley described it thus:

We had for the first time a band of instruments in our choir. The members were from different parts of the town and were kind enough to give us the first exhibition they had ever made in public and the first of the kind ever on a public religious solemnity in the town. The scandalous indifference to vocal music has obliged us to have recourse to such expedients or our Church music must be lost. In all of our Societies the Bass Viol has been used, having been introduced about two years since. A Violin and Clarionet followed in our worship. The number of these, with the Tenour Viol, formed our band on this solemnity. The order of service was An Air [perhaps instrumental music]—Hymn 73, the instruments going over the tune, before the vocal music joined—Introductory prayer—An Air—Lesson—Hymn 4—Prayer—Psalm 32—Sermon—Collection for the Poor, an Air with a Chorus—Prayer—Hymn 42—Blessing—Concluding Air.<sup>11</sup>

The actual instruments which played on this occasion were listed in a later entry in Bentley's diary. On 24 January 1798, he noted that:

This evening was appointed to receive the little band of music which so kindly entertained us last Thanksgiving day. We had 2 Bass Viols, 3 German flutes & 6 violins, & passed the evening happily.<sup>12</sup>

Thus was the ice broken in one New England Congregational church. We may reasonably expect that Bentley's East Church was not alone in its acceptance of instrumental support for the choir and congregation. Some churches may have embraced instruments less enthusiastically, but few, apparently, were willing to forego completely their use and tolerate the bad singing that resulted.

Nathaniel Duren Gould, himself a singing-school leader, tunebook compiler, and church musician during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, testified to the wide use of instruments in the church, dating the use of the bass viol in the singing school from "about the commencement of Billings' career," or about 1770, but saying that "generally, it was considered unfit to have a place within the walls of the church."<sup>13</sup> He dates its introduction into the church at or before the beginning of the nineteenth century, calling it "the grand entering-wedge that opened the way for all other instruments."<sup>14</sup> Gould lists the flute as the next instrument to gain acceptance, followed by the oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and violin. As we have seen from the entries in Bentley's diary, the order of acceptance listed by Gould, with some minor adjustment, paralleled the process as it occurred at the East Church in Salem, Massachusetts.

One musician who played a prominent role in introducing instrumental music into New England churches was Samuel Holyoke (1762-1820). Holyoke, a Harvard graduate and a well known singing master, tunesmith and tunebook compiler in eastern New England, apparently became interested in instrumental music during the 1790s. Rev. Bentley made several mentions of his activities in his diary, and shortly before the Thanksgiving Day service in 1797 he noted:

This day we were assured of the assistance of the Musical Society formed to promote instrumental music. . . . Holyoke introduced much instrumental music & from his instructions has commenced the society now forming.<sup>15</sup>

On 1 January 1805, for the dedication of the New South Meeting House in Salem, Bentley remarked:

A large Band of music was provided & Mr. Holyoke took the direction. A double bass, 5 bass viols, 5 violins, 2 clarionets, 2 bassoons and 5 German flutes composed the instrumental music. About 80 singers, the greater part males, composed the vocal music. It could not have the refinement of taste as few of the singers were ever together before and most were instructed by different masters. But in these circumstances it was good.<sup>16</sup>

To support his teaching activities among instrumental performers, Holyoke compiled and published a method book in two volumes, called *The Instrumental Assistant*. Volume I, issued by Henry Ranlet of Exeter, New

Hampshire, in 1800, contained instructions for the violin, German flute, clarinet, bass viol, and oboe—those very instruments most commonly associated with church music. While the musical contents are exclusively secular—largely marches and popular songs for unspecified instruments in duet and trio combinations—a few pieces might have served as the prelude and postlude for the Thanksgiving Day service just mentioned or for other church services.<sup>17</sup> In 1807, again through Ranlet's publishing house, Holyoke issued the second volume of *The Instrumental Assistant*, adding playing instructions for the French horn and bassoon. The collection of pieces in this volume not only enjoys fuller scoring than the duets and trios in Volume I, but also includes specified instrumentation for many of the works. Clearly, what demand there was for these volumes, we may reasonably assume, arose from the increased instrumental activity in the gallery of New England Congregational churches.

In the same year that Holyoke issued the second volume of his *Instrumental Assistant*, a tunebook compiler published the first instructions for instruments to appear in an American tunebook. Jonathan Huntington (1771-1838) issued his *Apollo Harmony* in 1807 through Horace Graves in Northampton, Massachusetts. In it he included basic instructions for the German flute and the bass viol. In a prefatory note, Huntington explained that

The Violincello [*sic*] and German flute, being Instruments much used with vocal music, and their tone being nearest to the human voice (when well played) induces me to insert instructions for them in this book. Many undertake to play without knowledge of their scale, and by that means destroy all taste for good performance. — It is therefore recommended to all such as attempt to perform on those instruments, to first gain a thorough acquaintance with the scales.<sup>18</sup>

Huntington gives further evidence of the performance practice by specifying in some tunes in his collection which instruments should double the vocal parts. In "Archdale," for example, he asks that the "air" (in the treble) and the tenor be doubled by two flutes (presumably at the octave above) and that the bass viol double the bass part.<sup>19</sup> In "Resurrection," the upper three voices are doubled by flutes (again probably an octave above) with the bass viol again taking the vocal bass line.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far we have relied upon written testimony to establish the use of instruments in the choir loft. What about the music itself? Some years before Bentley recorded the admittance of instruments into his church, short "symphonies" (i.e., instrumental preludes and interludes) began to be added to anthems and set pieces in some American tunebooks.<sup>21</sup> An early example appears in Samuel Holyoke's 1791 tunebook *Harmonia Americana*, where he not only includes instrumental symphonies, but also has a separate instrumental bass part in several pieces.<sup>22</sup> A good example of this type of instrumental usage occurs in Holyoke's anthem, "Champlain"—one of the few of his many

compositions to achieve a modest popularity.<sup>23</sup> Holyoke later expanded “Champlain,” rescoring it for a small orchestra of two clarinets, two violins, two horns, viola and bassoon. Comparing the version published in 1791 with that of 1806 shows that, while the voice parts were only slightly altered, the instrumental parts were completely rewritten.

Other compilers began to include symphonies and instrumental bass parts in their anthems and set-pieces during the 1790s; for example, Oliver Holden in his *Union Harmony* (1793),<sup>24</sup> and William Billings in *The Continental Harmony* (1794)<sup>25</sup> and *The Massachusetts Compiler* (1795)<sup>26</sup> are among the earliest. The majority of the tunebooks including compositions with symphonies were published after 1800, when—as has been suggested—instrumental support for the voices seems to have become rather widespread.

How long did the gallery orchestra remain a part of the New England church-music scene? We do not know for sure, since seldom is the discontinuance of a practice carefully documented. Undoubtedly, the length of time the church band functioned varied from town to town. In some places, it may have achieved the status of a tradition, like lining-out, that continued long after the practical need for it ceased to exist. In others, it may have been quickly superseded. Lucy Larcom, in her *A New-England Girlhood*, speaking of the 1830s, describes “a premonitory groan or squeak from bass-viol or violin, as if the instruments were clearing their throats.”<sup>27</sup> Clearly, for her, the band was still a part of early ecclesiastical memories.

One of the factors that may have led to the decline of the gallery orchestra was the advent of the reed organ, an inexpensive and ubiquitous substitute for band instruments. In 1809, as Rev. Bentley noted, organs in New England churches were still rather rare.

Organs are now used in our principal towns & in several towns in this Country, perhaps as many as 12 in this state in Congregational Churches: 3 in Boston, 2 in Salem, 1 in Newbury Port.<sup>28</sup>

While twelve organs in Congregational churches are not many, considering that Congregationalism was by far the prevalent denomination in the area, nonetheless the enumeration suggests a trend. Old prejudices against the organ were falling away, and new technology produced a cheaper, if inferior, instrument. Leonard Ellinwood has noted that:

Reed organs came into increasingly wide use in smaller churches during the nineteenth century. These melodeons and harmoniums, as they were called, began to be manufactured in France and in Bavaria shortly after 1800. In America the first instruments of this type were constructed *ca.* 1818, having a single bellows and never more than two sets of reeds.<sup>29</sup>

Orpha Ochse reinforces Ellinwood's statement:

A new factor to influence the organ industry during this time was the appearance of melodeons and harmoniums. These so-called reed organs gained such great popularity both for home use and in country churches that the building of small pipe organs was practically brought to a halt by mid-century. Melodeons were inexpensive, easy to move, and required a minimum of upkeep.<sup>30</sup>

Harmoniums and melodeons had some of the same advantages of low cost and portability associated with orchestral instruments, with one decisive advantage: melody, harmony, and counterpoint could be provided by one person. Rather than having the crowded choir loft further populated with three, four, or more performers, one player could sit inconspicuously at one instrument at the side of the meeting house and accompany both choir and congregation with greater precision. By the 1840s the reed organ seems to have been in wide use in New England churches, and with its coming the purpose and function of the gallery orchestra was rendered obsolete.

In summary, the gallery orchestra was an *ad hoc* assemblage of instruments, designed principally to support the vocal parts in hymn-tunes, anthems and set-pieces. It consisted of any number and combination of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, violins, violas and cellos (one cannot rule out other instruments as well) without any widespread specific regard to balance or range or even, apparently, the proficiency of the performers. Like many things associated with the New England church in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was a stop-gap measure to attend to an immediate problem. Undoubtedly, the instrumental make-up changed from one Sunday to the next, and no attempt was made to standardize it or recognize it as an ensemble of significance within the church structure. Unlike the singing of the choir and congregation, the added color and sonic variety provided by instruments in the church gallery—as charming or novel as they may have been—were never considered essential adjuncts to public worship. As soon as it had outlived its usefulness, the gallery orchestra was allowed to fade from the scene.

## NOTES

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1. Nicholas Temperley, *Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 51ff, makes the point that English parish churches with organs during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were often too poor to keep them up. Thus, by the time of the Puritan edict against organs in 1644, many country churches had long done without them.

2. Cotton Mather, *The Accomplished Singer* (Boston, 1721) as quoted in George Hood, *A History of Music in New England* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, 1846; reprint, New York: Johnson, 1970), 110.

3. Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* (Boston, 1721), 3.
4. The singing school was attended mostly by young, unmarried persons of both sexes and was a rare, clergy-approved contact between them. See Alan Buechner, *Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England* (D.Ed. dissertation, Harvard University, 1960), 284-285.
5. Buechner, 262-271, particularly Table 5, 268-270, which lists the dates when choirs were established in various New-England towns.
6. Christian Ignatius Latrobe, *Hymn-Tunes Sung in the Church of the United Brethren* (London, ca.1790), as quoted in *The New Haven Collection of Sacred Music* (Dedham: Mann, 1818), vi.
7. Leonard Ellinwood, *The History of American Church Music* (New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1953), 57, notes that "by 1800 there were approximately twenty organs throughout New England, mostly in Episcopal churches due to prejudices which still lingered in most Puritan congregations.
8. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962), 163. The German flute is the transverse flute, as distinguished from the "English flute," which is the recorder.
9. *Ibid.*, II: 175. The Tenour-Viol is the viola.
10. *Ibid.*, II: 207-208.
11. *Ibid.*, II: 247-248.
12. *Ibid.*, II: 255.
13. Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 168-169.
14. *Ibid.*, 170-173.
15. Bentley, *Diary*, II: 216.
16. *Ibid.*, III: 131.
17. Samuel Holyoke, *The Instrumental Assistant*, vol. I (Exeter, N.H.: Henry Ranlet, [1800]. See in particular "God Save America" (25), "A Favorite Air" (59), "Handel's Water Piece" (62), "An Air" (68), "Stamitz's Air" (72) and "Echo" (74) as examples of pieces which might have been performed in a church service without objection.
18. Jonathan Huntington, *The Apollo Harmony* (Northampton, Mass.: Horace Graves, 1807), "Preface," ii.
19. *Ibid.*, 50.
20. *Ibid.*, 54.
21. The earliest example of symphonies in an American sacred choral work is William Billings's anthem "Peace," which he published independently in about 1783. It contains an introduction, several interludes, and a coda for unspecified instruments. See *The Complete Works of William Billings*, ed. Karl Kroeger and Hans Nathan (Boston: American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-1990), vol. III, 257-275.
22. Samuel Holyoke, *Harmonia Americana* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1791), "Baltimore" (91) and "Christmas" (109).
23. *Ibid.*, 69. Herman Mann's 1806 print of "Champlain" was issued as Holyoke's *Occasional Companion No. II*.
24. Oliver Holden, *The Union Harmony* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1793), II: 13, 15, 17, 61, 110, and 168.
25. William Billings, *The Continental Harmony* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1794), 113, 115.
26. Hans Gram, Oliver Holden, and Samuel Holyoke, *The Massachusetts Compiler of Theoretical and Practical Elements of Sacred Vocal Music* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1795), 51, 58, 65.
27. Lucy Larcom, *A New-England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889), 72.
28. Bentley, vol. III, 415, entry for 12 February 1809.
29. Ellinwood, *American Church Music*, 117.
30. Orpha Ochse, *History of the Organ in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 112.