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## **Billings at Boulder: Doctoral Seminar Explores His Music**

The publication in April 1990 of the final volume of *The Complete Works of William Billings* provided the impetus for a detailed exploration of Billings's music, its antecedents, forms, styles, and influence. A seminar on his music, offered during the fall semester of 1990 at the University of Colorado at Boulder, attracted eleven doctoral students of widely varied backgrounds. Included in the class were four choral conducting majors, three in music history, two in vocal performance, and one each in organ and piano. This diversity of background assured an interesting mix of perspectives in the class discussions.

The seminar met weekly for three hours between 29 August and 12 December, a total of sixteen sessions. The course covered the British and American antecedents of Billings's music, his life and musical activities, the forms in which he composed, his musical style, and his influence on his day and later periods. The overall charge for the seminar was Billings's statement published in his *The Continental Harmony* (Boston, 1794): "Although I am not confined to rules [of composition] prescribed by others, yet I come as near as I possibly can to a set of rules which I have carved out for myself."<sup>1</sup>

Billings never committed his "rules" to print, and the intention of the seminar was to discover some of the underlying principles that governed his compositional choices. We wanted also to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of Billings's music, its aesthetics, and its place in the society that used it.

The work of the seminar was largely directed by the participants. Each member was assigned a subject in which to lead the discussion for a particular session. Through readings and study of the music beforehand, other members were able to gain sufficient background in that subject to enter into the discussion by posing questions and making observations. Some topics included the contents, arrangement, and uses of each of Billings's six tunebooks, the forms in which Billings composed, his melodic and harmonic style, and performance practice in his music. The discussions were often lively and frequently included performances of pieces under consideration.

In addition to the singing as part of class discussion, the final hour of the seminar every other week was devoted to singing through selected pieces by Billings and his contemporaries. Important works from each of Billings's tunebooks were introduced and read at each singing session, along with several pieces by Billings's colleagues and rivals. On 10 October, the singing session celebrated Billings's 244th birthday (which actually occurred on the 7th) with a party that included the singing of "Happy Birthday, Bill Billings" as a fusing tune.

Besides the report in class, seminar members were responsible for completing a number of class assignments to be turned in, looked over by the seminar leader, and discussed in class. These included a transcription of a tune from the fasola notation in John Tufts, *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes*, 5th ed. (Boston, 1726), the rebaring of an anthem by William Tansur, an analysis comparing the settings of the Sternhold and Hopkins text "The Lord descended from above" by James Lyon and Billings, and a short paper marshaling evidence and arguments for or against the idea that the anonymous tune PARI A in John Norman's *The Massachusetts Harmony* (Boston, 1784) is actually by Billings.

Two composition assignments gave seminar members practical experience in dealing with music in Billings's style. These included making a four-part setting following Billings's compositional principles of his single-line canonic melody, "When Jesus Wept," and recomposing a Billings tune using the variation method described in the article, "William Billings's Music in Manuscript Copy."<sup>2</sup> The composition assignments were sung and discussed in class. These assignments brought a greater appreciation of the skill that Billings brought to his pieces.

Each seminar member produced a research paper on some aspect of Billings's music. Some paper topics included a study of his Christmas pieces, his Song of Solomon settings, his harmonic style, his original poetry, and an analysis of vocal problems in his music from the singer's viewpoint.

The outcome of the Billings seminar was a greater understanding of his music and its aesthetic and technical foundations. Each member took away some attractive, performable pieces that have already begun appearing on choir concerts and in Sunday morning church services. Finally, a general consensus developed among seminar participants that Billings, by any measure, was a significant composer whose music should be more widely studied, taught, and performed.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup>William Billings, *The Continental Harmony*, as quoted in *The Complete Works of William Billings*, 4 vols., ed. by Karl Kroeger and Hans Nathan (Boston: American Musicological Society, 1977-1990), IV, 32.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Kroeger, "William Billings's Music in Manuscript Copy and Some Notes on Variant Versions of his Pieces," *Notes*, XXXIX (December 1982), 316-345.