

Biographical Note and Foreword

Harold Earle Johnson was born May 10, 1903, in New London, Connecticut. He was the only offspring of Harold A. Johnson and Elizabeth Whittaker Johnson. He received his first musical training in piano and organ from Edward L. Sumner at the Worcester County Music School. He earned a Bachelor of Music degree from Boston University in 1935, a second Bachelor of Music and a Master of Music degree from Yale in 1936 and 1937 respectively, and then continued with postgraduate study at Harvard in 1937 and 1938. His interest in American music was furthered by Otto Kinkeldey, Carl Engle, Paul Henry Lang, and Archibald T. Davison.

From 1937 to 1942 Johnson taught at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. After service in the United States Army Air Force from 1942 to 1945, he returned to Clark and continued his teaching career until 1953. He made his home in Boston until 1968 and pursued his interest in research and writing. His output includes five books, all of which have continued to serve as basic works in American studies: *Musical Interludes in Boston 1795–1830* (New York, 1943, reprinted 1967); *Symphony Hall, Boston* (Boston, 1950, reprinted 1979); *Opera on American Subjects* (New York, 1965); *Hallelujah Amen!: The Story of the Handel and Haydn Society* (Boston, 1965, reprinted 1981); and *First Performances in America to 1900* (Detroit, 1976). He also wrote numerous articles and reviews for the *Journal for American Musicological Society*, *The Musical Quarterly*, *Journal for Research in Music Education*, *Music Library Association Notes*, and *American Music*, and contributed to dictionaries including the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, and *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

In 1975 Johnson was invited to The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, as a Professor in the Eminent Scholars Program. From 1979 until 1983 he served as Lecturer in Music at William and Mary and as music critic for *The Virginia Gazette*. Except for a brief stay in New London, he lived in Williamsburg after his retirement in 1983 until his death on October 24, 1988.

A founder of the Sonneck Society for American Music, Johnson was named to honorary membership in the organization in 1987, thereby joining other such distinguished figures as Virgil Thomson, Wilfred Mellers, Gilbert Chase, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Howard Hanson. The citation for Johnson reads, in part:

A modest private individual, Earle is staunch in his belief that a man stands not on pedigree but on his work. Johnson's work is impressive. Nonetheless, Earle's associates also value the human being behind the works—a sincere, genuine man who enjoys companionship and is at home

with people from diverse walks of life, a man unintentionally depicted by Earle himself in lines he quotes from William Henry Channing:

To live content with small means;
 to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
 to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
 to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;
 to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;
 to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
 In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through
 the common. This is to be my symphony.

H. Earle Johnson . . . is an uncommon common American. As a scholar and as a man he stands tall. We are privileged to count him among our number.

A New Englander in origin and training, Earle Johnson retained a New England viewpoint and a fondness for the region throughout his life. Had he been able to fulfill a last wish, his final hours would have been spent in his place of birth, New London, Connecticut.

Interest in the bard of Cambridge and his cultural environment spanned the greater part of H. Earle Johnson's creative life. In 1943, his first book, *Musical Interludes in Boston 1795–1830*, was published. In the winter of 1945–46, Longfellow as a subject for a musicologist first came to his attention.¹ Considerable research was done in the 1950s, but *Longfellow and Music*, completed in Williamsburg in 1980, is a late work, possibly his last manuscript.² There is no evidence that a publisher had been contacted for the book, but his papers include correspondence with a publisher in 1985 regarding an article, "The Musical Longfellows." This article was drawn from the book, originally Chapters I, II, and III. "The Musical Works Considered" is Chapter IV in the book manuscript. Though complete and obviously proofread, it was still unpublished when he suffered the stroke that brought his creative life to an abrupt end.

Johnson was highly selective in what he retained in his personal library and files. In addition to the Longfellow materials, three unpublished books and research notes for several other projects escaped the shredding machine. These were all works he valued, but above all, he prized his Longfellow research. He believed his materials were unique and he lamented the possibility of their loss to cultural historians.

A musician by profession, he was at home in artistic circles and enjoyed the friendship of literary colleagues.³ Nearly half of the books in his library dealt with nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, but he also had a strong interest in Shakespeare. A plaque presented to him as a member of the Shakespeare Club of Cambridge was one of his most treasured mementos.

Longfellow and Music encompasses all of Johnson's characteristic writing styles. Part I, "The Musical Longfellows," flows in his typical prose style.



H. Earle Johnson in 1972. Courtesy Bonnie Hedges.

Working for over a year in Longfellow's study, reading the diaries and copying in longhand the passages relating to music, he was transported in time. He was completely at ease with his subjects, the Longfellows and their friends, and his words seem to come from firsthand association.

As a budding newspaper critic, Earle developed early on an independent attitude and readiness to express his views.⁴ Later, as a mature, renowned author and teacher, he admonished young writers to "make it interesting." The extent to which he practiced this in his own writing is reflected in his discussion of the musical works.⁵

Johnson's ability to compile significant information from primary sources with methodical, painstaking treatment of details is evident in his list of compositions based on Longfellow's works. References to performances inserted in his listing bring to mind *First Performances in America to 1900* (Detroit: College Music Society, 1979). His discussion of publishers reveals the depth of his investigations and recognition of the limits of factual information. Thus this posthumous publication, *Longfellow and Music*, stemming from a lifetime interest and illustrating his methods and writing styles, stands as an epitome of the life and works of H. Earle Johnson.

Earle Johnson's interest in the musical significance of Longfellow was not idiosyncratic. In the 1980s other scholars were studying the use of Longfellow's literary works in music compositions.⁶ Michael Hovland, in his comprehensive work *Musical Settings of American Poetry: A Bibliography*, records 1,224 (of 5,640 total) entries as vocal compositions with texts by Longfellow. Whitman, with 720 entries, ranks second.⁷ Hovland's purpose was "to link American literary texts with their published musical settings."⁸ He presents basic information in a concise, consistent format and provides composer and title indices. He envisioned and created a reference work useful to performers and program planners in selecting repertory.

Johnson's list is not an end in itself but part of a musical study of Longfellow. As such, it serves as an illustration of Longfellow's influence in musical life in America. In addition to published vocal music, Johnson lists manuscripts, stage works, and music inspired by poems (i.e., piano music), and he annotates some of the works. Some annotations are lengthy; information takes precedence over a consistent format as far as Johnson is concerned.

To assemble the works of one whose knowledge of his subject and extensive research is beyond compare is indeed a challenge fraught with many hazards. It has been undertaken by the present compiler in all humility in order to fulfill a last desire of a worthy scholar and loyal friend—to see his Longfellow article in print. It is unfortunate that Earle Johnson could not be consulted and allowed the final word—a condition he considered to be the prerogative of an author.

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