

Marvin C. Genuchi—*The Life and Music of Jacob French (1754-1817), Colonial American Composer.*  
*Volume I: Background, Biography, Style Study.*  
*Volume II: Music Supplement of Anthems, Psalm Tunes, and Hymn Tunes*

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The weaving of a *Fachliteratur* that treats of American music (and music in America) proceeds at slow shuttle speed. It is indeed pleasurable, however, to report that Dr. Genuchi's dissertation has patched one of the many holes that weaken the fabric of biographical studies of our native composers. One regrets that his work has not done an equivalent service in the field of style analysis.

The dissertation is organized with an eye toward making its use a comfortable experience. In the Foreword, Genuchi explains that he has placed his text and French's music in separate volumes in order to make it possible for readers who are mainly interested in one to be unencumbered by the other. He alerts the reader to ". . . one significant fact [that] is apparent in the music of Jacob French: William Billings may have had less influence on his contemporaries than has previously been surmised" (p. iii). It is hardly significant that Billings "may" have had less influence—he "may" have had the same amount or more. Genuchi bases this claim solely on the fact that French, in his middle years, dissociated his musical style from that of Billings and aligned it with the music of the English school of psalmists. This well-taken observation proves that Billings' influence on French was not permanent, but hardly provides sufficient evidence for as sweeping a statement as the author chooses to make.

It is unjust to contend that, barring the discovery of another "free spirit" like William Billings, the Puritan music of Colonial America probably "can be expected to produce mediocrity" (p. v). One must begin by treating history accurately. Jacob French is specifically *not* a "Colonial American Composer." Dr. Genuchi tells us that French's first composition ". . . was written for the 1783 publication of Oliver Brownson's *Select Harmony*" (p. 44). This date is seven years after the dissolution of our colonial status. French retired from teaching and composition at the age of sixty-one (1815). Therefore, his first composition was published *after* we had fought one war to establish the Republic, and he retired the year after the Peace of Ghent ended a second war (the War of 1812) that was fought in order to preserve it. Since Dr. Genuchi refers to French as a "Colonial American Composer," one assumes that he considers the Colonial Period to encompass the years from 1783

though 1815. If so, his dismissal of sacred music written by post-Revolution American composers as merely an imitation of mediocre British models is tantamount to denying the existence of what is probably the most individual indigenous body of music in our heritage. One cannot ignore the distinctively American character of tunes such as Supply Belcher's "Jubilant," Jacob Kimball's "Marblehead," and Timothy Swan's curiously attractive "China," with their predilection for open fourths, fifths, and octaves (particularly at cadences), their tendency toward parallelism that tints the music with an *organum*-like cast, and their frequent use of hexatonic modes. The numerous notational systems developed during the Federal Period reveal early-American leanings toward "tinkering" and inventiveness, and also demonstrate an independence from Old World procedures. Some of these systems are still used in rural areas as are a number of late 18th- and early 19th-century tunes. A hasty survey of the 1966 edition of the *Original Sacred Harp* (Cullman, Ala.) reveals that no less than thirty American Psalm settings and hymn tunes of this genre (dated 1817 or before) are still in the contemporary repertory. "Mediocrity" does not describe this persistent American idiom. The music is of its own time and culture and should be judged in terms of both.

Chapter I, "The Evolution of Church Music in New England between 1620 and 1800 . . .," is as good a survey of this subject as can be found in any current study. Genuchi evidences sensitivity to the changes undergone by the music he discusses and good sense in the choice of composers and tune books that make up the frame of his structure. Although this section contains more than one-quarter of the total text, it is well worth the space devoted to it. One would have liked a few more words relative to social aspects of the singing schools. Gottlieb Graupner is mentioned simply as "a Boston publisher" (p. 31), despite the fact that, between 1800 and 1836, he founded the Boston Philharmonic Society, was co-founder of the Handel and Haydn Society, and led Boston's active musical life as teacher, conductor, performer, and publisher. In the highly pertinent list of definitions from William Billings' *New England Psalm Singer* (1770) the spelling of the straightforward Italian term "PIENO," correctly defined by Billings as "full, or all together," is questioned by Genuchi thus: "[BIENE?]" (p. 19).

Chapter II, French's biography, is short, but again Dr. Genuchi has done his work well. The terse directness of this section is complemented by a lengthy, succulent quotation from a pertinent document of the period. This document (designated W16578D by Genuchi) contains information provided by French's widow in an effort to establish her late husband's Revolutionary War record. She found this necessary in obtaining the pension to which she was entitled. In her deposition Mrs. French allows us the few personal glimpses of her husband that we have: we read how French, dangerously ill after the battle of Ticonderoga, despaired of ever returning home.

Genuchi assumed that his readers would find useful a survey of musical development in New England, and he thoughtfully provided an excellent

one. The years encompassed by French's life were among the most yeasty in American history; yet, however well Genuchi has treated their musical aspects, his treatment of them, from the standpoint of social and political history, is unleavened. French, as a musician and as a man, appears to have existed in a cultural near-vacuum. Should Dr. Genuchi consider revision of his text for publication, he would do well to provide a historical framework for French's life similar to the one he provided for French's music in Chapter I.

Chapter III presents the "General Characteristics of the Anthems, Psalm Tunes, and Hymn Tunes of Jacob French." Under the headings of Poetic Meter, Length, Form, Tonality, Melody, and Musical Evaluation, the stuff of French's music receives broad descriptive treatment. Quotations that delineate various characteristics of the English anthem have been extracted from Daniel's *The Anthem in New England Before 1800* (1966), and they lead into paragraphs that demonstrate how French's anthems fit (or do not fit) Daniel's matrix. Genuchi's treatment is quite accurate. More could be made of the fact that in this music the texts are a prime element of control, particularly since many of them are rhymed and metrical. Occasionally the author uses descriptive terms that he neither explains nor clarifies through example. The expression "adjunct (limited angularity) melodies" (pp. 59 and 63) is not clear, nor can one be certain of what Dr. Genuchi intends by declaring that certain psalm and hymn tunes are "capsular versions" of anthems (p. 64).

Unfortunately one must lower the lance at the disappointing fourth chapter: "Analysis of Twelve Anthems and Fifty Representative Psalm and Hymn Tunes." Dr. Genuchi discusses aspects of each piece under the following formal headings: Text, Length, Form, Tonality, Melody, Meter and Rhythm, and Musical Evaluation. The material presented under all but the last heading is understandably more descriptive than analytical and frequently shows that Dr. Genuchi is a keen observer of his subject matter. But the hoped-for analytical amalgam in Musical Evaluation rarely arrives, and in its place one finds an application of subjective standards that are not fully clarified. The Foreword offers some elucidation of the procedures followed in Musical Evaluation. The author states that these evaluations are his alone "and afford a possibility for wide difference of opinion" (p. iii). They are, according to him, reached on a comparative basis: i.e., French's music is compared to that of his contemporaries. The evaluations are "an earnest attempt to assign some sort of standard to Colonial American music, with the understanding that the composers who wrote it (French in this case) were basically self-trained" (p. iii). Dr. Genuchi is correct. His evaluations afford the possibility for a considerable difference of opinion, owing to the fact that they are highly subjective. He assigns the following values to French's works: excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor. One is reminded of the questionable value in a similar approach taken by Lomax in his *Cantometrics* project. Unfortunately the reader is not given an overview of how French did relate to his contemporaries, and there are only rare explanations of the standards

being applied by Dr. Genuchi in order to elicit a judgment of "excellent," "fair," etc. There is no question about the earnestness of the author's attempt; perusal of this study reveals that a great deal of painstaking research went into its compilation, but there are no standards established here—only personal value judgments that are frequently free-standing without style-analytical buttressing. Here are a few examples taken from "Musical Evaluation," except for the first and third excerpts which are drawn from "Meter and Rhythm" and "Melody," respectively.

"I Beheld and Lo"

[This is one of French's most popular anthems and is generally known as "The Heavenly Vision." Perhaps it would have been advisable to list it under the more familiar title.]

. . . the dotted half-notes used in  $\frac{3}{2}$  meter on the words "Holy, Holy." This gives the music a pleading, plaintive expression . . . (p. 80). *I Beheld and Lo* begins to show traces of English influence, through the passing-note ornaments of the melody and through rhythmic patterns associated with the English school. . . . [Dr. Genuchi provides a catalogue of these English influences (p. 63): dotted rhythmic patterns and ornamentation of the melody by melisma, passing notes, and neighboring notes. Inspection of the score (Vol. II, p. 4) reveals few dotted patterns and only one melisma fittingly applied to the word "flying." This melisma carries through only one measure. Auxiliary tones are present but not to the degree that one's attention is drawn to them. Might these not be the composer's attempt to offer a little relief from a heavily syllabic setting and not necessarily the assumption of a foreign style?]

"Righteous Art Thou"

The melody has less tendency toward scalewise movement than did the first two anthems; leaps of thirds, fourths, and fifths are common throughout the work. . . (p. 83).

[but]

The melody has more interest in it than has that of any of the other anthems of this period, attributable no doubt, to the scalewise nature of its progression . . . (p. 84).

"Why Dost Thou Sit Solitary, O Jersualem"

. . . could be classed as a very good, though not excellent anthem . . . (p. 87). [How does one establish the border between the two categories?]

"Now After These Things"

. . . which might be classed as only good . . . (p. 89). [Does Dr. Genuchi mean "nothing more than good" or that there is nothing bad about the piece?]

“Athens”

. . . has strong modal tendencies. . . (p. 110). [Is this good or bad, typical or atypical?]

“Abyssinia”

. . . a fair hymn tune. . . (p. 111). [Why?]

“Providence”

. . . . The melody is weak and the rhythms are not effective enough to carry the melodic weakness (p. 153).

“Coventry”

. . . is an excellent hymn tune. The melody is strong, the harmonies are effective and the meter is especially well chosen for this particular setting (p. 143).

“Retribution”

The melody is strong and the harmonies and rhythms are effective. . . (p. 155).

“Sabbath”

The melody is strong and the harmonies and rhythms are effective. . . (p. 156).

“Babylon”

. . . is an excellent psalm tune. The melody is strong, the harmonies are effective, and the rhythms carry the mood of the melody very well. . . (p. 138).

“Winthrop”

. . . is a very good tune. The melody is strong. . . (p. 158).

The appearance of “hedging” words, such as “might” and “could,” dilutes one’s confidence in the firmness of Dr. Genuchi’s conclusions, and the adjectives “weak,” “strong,” and “effective” should have been utilized only if the author had made clear his interpretation of them. Many of the author’s analyses are satisfactory, but too many fall short of fulfilling the basic requirements of sound, style-analytical technique. After analysis of the music, one looks for general conclusions drawn from the numerous specific investigations. Here they are presented first in Chapter III. A more logical order would result from reversing the positions of Chapters III and IV.

French’s *New American Melody* (1789) provides most of the material for Chapter V: “Performance Practice of the French Compositions.” This material is helpful and well presented. It will serve admirably as a companion to the volume of transcriptions, particularly for choir directors who wish to have French’s music performed.

The bibliography of primary sources, listed chronologically, is a comprehensive reference tool. One can attribute the slimness of the secondary-source bibliography to the fact that Genuchi’s study is basically analytical and that his historical references are mainly primary sources.

The transcriptions contained in Volume II are clear and well organized. The author drew them from the *Psalmody's Companion, New American Melody*, and the *Harmony of Harmony*. The few that this reviewer checked were accurate. A title index indicates the source of each selection. In the Foreword to Volume I Dr. Genuchi describes Volume II as containing French's anthems and ". . . a majority of his published psalm tunes and hymn tunes" (p. iii). The author is entitled to make selections, but he does owe his readers a complete list of French's works with at least one primary source for each. It might be of interest to have a transcript of the "corrections suggested by French in his own errata lists" (p. ii), since the author incorporated them in his copies of the music. Dr. Genuchi does not inform the reader whether these were corrections of errors or compositional changes suggested by French. There is a disagreement between Dr. Genuchi and Professor Robert Stevenson relative to the anthem "O sing unto the Lord." In his *Protestant Church Music in America* (p. 72) Professor Stevenson, citing the same source as Dr. Genuchi, finds an Italian augmented-sixth chord in measure five of this piece, whereas Dr. Genuchi copies out only the outer voices descending in quarter-note parallel tenths (inner voices are silent). Was this changed by Dr. Genuchi as a result of suggestions in French's *errata* list, of which Professor Stevenson was not aware?

Despite lapses in analytical technique, this dissertation is a felicitous addition to the historiography of American music. One hopes that it will be part of a rapidly growing literature that serves to illuminate our indigenous musical culture.