

dissertations

Earl McLain Owen, Jr.—*The Life and Music of Supply Belcher (1751–1836), “Handel of Maine”*

Volume I: Text, xvii + 152 pp.

Volume II: Musical Supplement, vi + 204 pp.

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American studies is a comparatively little-researched region of historical musicology. As with any youthful area of study the often laborious and frustrating task of laying a basic bibliographical and biographical foundation must be accomplished before more definitive studies can be achieved. Dr. Owen's dissertation contributes to this growing foundation and, thus, to a developing knowledge of our musical heritage.

Dr. Owen organizes his study in a deductive manner, progressing from an investigation of the composer's life to his musical publications and culminating in a stylistic study of the music.

In the introductory remarks of Chapter I, Dr. Owen explains that “on October 22, 1886, an extensive fire in the central district of Farmington quite possibly destroyed certain priceless documents such as letters, diaries, singing society records, etc. Therefore, it has been necessary that this investigator base his historical research mainly on secondary sources—nineteenth century histories, correspondence with historians and libraries, and recently published books” (p. 1). This is a supposition, which the author does not attempt to justify. It is also “quite possible” that there were no records of any importance relating to Supply Belcher destroyed in the Farmington fire. Lack of primary biographical source material is a handicap, but, in spite of this limitation, Dr. Owen manages to reconstruct the chronological framework of Belcher's life and to paint a vivid picture of the composer's relationship to his family and his community.

The biographical discussion of Chapter II divides Belcher's life into two periods, the first dealing with the composer's early life in Massachusetts and the second treating his later years in Maine from 1785 to his death in 1836. The first section primarily provides data documenting Belcher's early life and his role in the American Revolution. Of particular interest is the discussion of Belcher's musical training and his possible association with the singing school operated by William Billings in Stoughton, Massachusetts, in January of 1774. Because it has generally been assumed, though never conclusively established, that Billings exerted a strong influence on other early American

psalmists, the definite establishment of a teacher-student relationship between him and one of the other Yankee tunesmiths would, indeed, be revealing. Ralph Daniel, in his study of the New England anthem,¹ has, in fact, placed Belcher as a student in Billings's singing school. Dr. Owen disproves this statement, however, by providing in an appendix the membership list of that school, a list which does not include the name of Supply Belcher.

In the documentation of Belcher's later years, the New England composer emerges as a man concerned with and active in his community. In addition to discussing Belcher's role as the local singing master, Dr. Owen documents the composer's activity as town clerk, representative to the Massachusetts legislature (Maine having been a part of Massachusetts until 1820), town selectman, and justice of the peace. Such observations seem especially pertinent to studies of composers whose music was so closely allied to community life.

Although informative and generally quite readable, this chapter only partially fulfills its professed purpose. In his introductory remarks, Dr. Owen states that the "task of the second chapter is to establish Supply Belcher's position in history and to reveal the various roles he and his family played in the development of our cultural heritage" (p. 1). Although the author mentions these roles, he fails to relate them to contemporaneous political, economic, and social developments or to place them in a historical framework. The composer's life would have emerged in a broader dimension had these relationships been designated.

Chapter III, "Supply Belcher's Musical Publications," introduces the reader to the American tunebooks which contain music by the composer, with a brief résumé of their printers and compilers. A commentary on the theoretical introduction to the most extensive single collection of Belcher's music, *The Harmony of Maine* (1794), forms the basis for the greater part of this chapter. Dr. Owen begins by stating that "Supply Belcher's extant, published works are located in the following tunebook publications: (1) *The Harmony of Maine*, 1794; (2) *The Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony*, 6th ed., 1797; (3) *The Hallowell Collection of Sacred Music*, 1817; and (4) *Ancient Harmony Revived*, 2nd ed., 1848" (p. 29). It is unfortunate that Dr. Owen did not pursue the publication history of Belcher's music in order to establish the extent of its popularity and influence. Such an investigation would have revealed that Belcher's music also appeared in the following collections:²

- Samuel Holyoke, *Columbian Harmony* [1802] (ST. JOHN'S)
- Abraham Maxim, *Northern Harmony*, 1805, 1808 (HALLOWELL, JUBILANT, RAPTURE, ST. DAVID'S NEW)
- Charles Robbins, *Columbia Harmony*, 1805 (Ordination Anthem: Hail, Thou King of Glory, TOPSHAM, HYMN 98, HYMN 116)
- Thomas Atwill, *New York and Vermont Collection* [1806] (POTENCY)
- John Busnell, *Musical Synopsis*, 1807 (EMANCIPATION, INVITATION, PROTECTION, PLENTITUDE, SPRING)
- Azariah Fobes, *Delaware Harmony*, 1809 (LILLY, VICTORY)

Although perhaps not so popular as those of some of his colleagues,³ Belcher's tunes enjoyed a much wider circulation than that implied by Dr. Owen's statement.

Closer attention to the publication history of Belcher's music would have revealed other interesting facts. For example, the fusing-tune APPEARANCE is the only tune by Belcher to be published before *The Harmony of Maine* and represents the earliest printing of a composition by the Maine composer. It appeared in two tunebooks in 1788, the *Worcester Collection* (2nd edition) and *Federal Harmony* (Boston: John Norman). Furthermore, in the latter tunebook the tune is not listed among those being published for the first time. Perhaps, Norman had the *Worcester Collection* in mind, or the publication history of APPEARANCE may have begun earlier than 1788. Although composer attributions are indicated in the table of contents of both tunebooks, the authorship of APPEARANCE is noted as "unknown." The tune retains this anonymous status as late as Nehemiah Shumway's *American Harmony*, printed in Philadelphia just one year before *The Harmony of Maine*.

In a 1953 checklist of unlocated titles in early American psalmody, Allen P. Britton and Irving Lowens listed only one item by Belcher, a "Celebrated Ordination Anthem" with "a number of other fusing pieces never before published," printed in 1797 by Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews in Boston.⁴ Dr. Owen suggests that this may be a reference to the anthem "Hail, Thou King of Glory" and the two fusing-tunes TOPSHAM and PITSTON. This hypothesis is based on the fact that these compositions, grouped together and attributed to Belcher, appeared in the sixth edition of the *Worcester Collection* in that same year. Dr. Owen might also have pointed out that these two publications were both announced by the press of Thomas and Andrews. The subsequent appearance of one of these fusing-tunes and the same anthem eight years later in Robbins's *Columbia Harmony* may lend additional support to Dr. Owen's argument. In any case, the consideration of these additional publications would have created a more accurate picture of Belcher's music in relation to the entire early American repertory.

It was common practice for tunebook composers and compilers to include an exposition of music theory at the beginning of their publications. This introduction was often the work of a different author. Such is the case with the introduction to *The Harmony of Maine*, which Dr. Owen identifies as "reproduced verbatim from *The Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1786), a tunebook in which Isaiah Thomas quite probably compiled and edited the music and wrote the musical instructions" (pp. 35-36). His next statement, however, proves to be inaccurate: "In addition to appearing in all eight editions of *The Worcester Collection of Sacred Harmony* and *The Harmony of Maine*, these instructions can be found in *The Boston Collection* (Boston: William Norman, c. 1800) and *The Federal Harmony* (Boston: John Norman [1788])" (p. 36). Previously in his dissertation, Dr. Owen pointed out a discrepancy in Britton's identification of these same instructions: "Britton contradicts himself by indicating that

these musical instructions were prepared by Oliver Holden, originally appearing in Holden's *Union Harmony*, Vol. I (1793). An examination of *Union Harmony*, Vol. I proves this statement to be incorrect" (p. 36, fn. 18). In his 1963 doctoral study of Oliver Holden, David W. McCormick clearly establishes that "Holden developed or compiled a set of rudiments and instructions for singers for the first edition of *Union Harmony* [1793], then revised this material slightly for succeeding editions of that work, and transferred it without change to the parallel edition of the *Worcester Collection*. Thus, the introductory material of the *Union Harmony*, 2d edition [1796], is identical with that of the *Worcester Collection*, 6th edition [1797]."⁵ It appears that the introduction to the *Worcester Collection*, editions one through five (1786–1794), also appeared in Belcher's *Harmony of Maine*, while those of the *Worcester Collection*, editions six through eight (1797–1803), under the editorship of Holden, were borrowed from the *Union Harmony*.

The text which follows contains a short commentary and discussion of each sub-heading of these instructions. Dr. Owen helpfully provides a photoduplication of the original text, which he urges the reader to study before reading his commentary. The ensuing discussion, which clarifies various points of that text, demonstrates a thorough understanding of the early American idiom. Some minor errors do, however, intrude. For example, Hans Gram did not "come to America from Germany" (p. 39). Gram was born in Copenhagen in 1756 and reached the United States only in 1785 by way of the Danish West Indies.⁶ Also, in the discussion of "the various moods of time used in psalmody" a table of metronomic equivalents is reproduced (Table II, p. 44), without indication of its derivation.⁷

One of the most surprising aspects of this chapter is the lack of importance attached to the original character of *The Harmony of Maine*. There would be little argument with the statement that "the great majority of tunebooks published during this period are made up of various composers' music and do not constitute the efforts of only one person" (p. 34). But this would seem to provide all the more reason to draw attention to similar ventures which predated Belcher's collection, such as Daniel Read's *The American Singing Book* (1785), Jacob French's *New American Harmony* (1789), Abraham Wood's *Divine Songs* (1789), Samuel Holyoke's *Harmonia Americana* (1791), Oliver Holden's *American Harmony* (1792), Jacob Kimball's *Rural Harmony* (1793), and all of Billings's tunebooks, with the exception of *Music in Miniature* (1799). While this group is small, it does encompass some of the most influential collections of 18th-century American psalmody.

The discussion of "Stylistic Observations" in Chapter IV is "based upon the following aspects: (1) general observations (texture, form, instrumental passages, key signature, time signature, tune names, the possible use of parody technique); (2) melody; (3) harmony; (4) text" (p. 2). Although this organization, strongly reminiscent of the fourth chapter of McCormick's dissertation, is generally successful, there are portions of the text which, it seems, could be more effective if combined or redistributed.⁸

The author provides a sound and thorough analysis of Belcher's style, progressing from general observations to more detailed investigations. He is always careful to support his analytical remarks with musical examples, cross-referenced by footnotes to the musical supplement in Volume Two. Such a system presents both advantages and disadvantages; while it is certainly more convenient for the author to copy the music only once and it is more economical to include the music in its complete form in a supplement, the need to refer to a separate volume when checking analytical statements against the music is a definite inconvenience, one that is particularly cumbersome when reading the dissertation on microfilm.

Most of the stylistic discussion benefits from the organization and presentation of material, but in several places confusion arises. For example, the fusing-tune is discussed in terms of texture, while the anthem and plain tune are relegated to the domain of form. The author never clearly states whether he considers the fusing-tune a formal type or an aspect of textural variety. This ambiguity is apparent in the statement, "Twenty-four of Belcher's tunes are fusing in form and texture. Although some deviate from the strictest definition of a fusing-tune, they all are sectionalized and contain some sort of imitation in the second section of the tune" (p. 55). This inconsistency in terminology carries over into the discussion of form, where the fusing-tune is ignored and the formal analysis restricted to those compositions which are "through-composed, each textual phrase being set to different music" (p. 61). Dr. Owen places psalm and hymn tunes, as well as anthems, into this classification. Even though most plain tunes have no phrase repetition within the setting of a single stanza, they are intended to be sung strophically to several stanzas of text. The reader could easily miss the point of the plain tune's strophic organization when it is classified with the truly through-composed anthem. A less confusing classification might base formal considerations on the relationship between the text and the music, and divide the compositions into fusing-tunes, plain tunes (without musical or textual phrase repetition), tunes with extension (with musical and textual phrase repetition), and anthems (set to a prose text in a through-composed manner).⁹

The author discusses rhythm as an aspect of melody and concentrates on the deployment of rhythm as an organizational factor. It might have been more helpful if the topics of "rhythmic pattern" and "melodic unity" had been united and grouped under the common heading of phrasing.

For convenient reference, at the end of the sections on general observations, melody, and harmony, the author provides a capsule summary of that section's salient points.

The discussion of Belcher's texts concentrates on a description of the meter and rhyme schemes employed. Possibly the most helpful aspect of Dr. Owen's research on these psalm and hymn texts is presented in chart form in Appendix J, where the texts are indexed by first line with an indication of meter and origin.

The sizeable bibliography is cast in a practical format of books; periodicals;

tunebooks, anthologies, psalters, hymnbooks; unpublished dissertations; and other sources (including personal letters and newspaper clippings).

The musical transcriptions of Volume Two are drawn from the three tunebooks mentioned in Chapter III and include all of Belcher's extant music. Editorial emendations are kept to a minimum, and the music is copied neatly and accompanied by "a piano reduction for rehearsal purposes" (p. 2).

One aspect of this study demands further comment. In his introduction, Dr. Owen states that one of his objectives is "to determine the reason for Belcher's having been given the title 'Handel of Maine'" (p. 1). The only stylistic reference to Handel which follows occurs on page 70: "It is likely that Belcher's admirers dubbed him 'Handel of Maine' because of his usage of very florid and ornate passages." This conjecture seems naive. This title was first applied to Belcher by the editor of a newspaper in a small New England town.¹⁰ It was then passed on by Metcalf, who probably overestimated its importance. In all probability the name of Handel, commonly encountered in literary magazines of the period, was a convenient epithet to symbolize the idea of a famous composer. It seems doubtful that any stylistic analogy was intended. It might have been helpful, however, if Dr. Owen had traced some references to Handel in contemporaneous newspapers, magazines, concert programs, and tunebooks. Some research has been done in this field already.¹¹

Dr. Owen's admirable study, nonetheless, has shed some light on another dim corner of American musical historiography and is a welcome addition to the growing standard bibliography of early American psalmody.

NOTES

¹ Ralph T. Daniel, *The Anthem in New England Before 1800* (Evanston, Illinois, 1966), p. 136.

² These tunebooks were drawn from an unpublished index compiled by Richard A. Crawford. The reviewer would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Crawford for allowing him to quote from this index. Names of tunes are placed in upper case letters throughout this paper.

³ As an adjunct study to his index, Dr. Crawford has compiled a list of the 100 most frequently published tunes. Forty-four of them are by native American composers, but Belcher is not represented. See Dr. Crawford's contribution to *Notes* (June, 1971).

⁴ Allen P. Britton and Irving Lowens, "Unlocated Titles in Early Sacred American Music," *Notes*, Series 2 (1953) 11:36. This reference is taken from an advertisement in an 18th-century American newspaper quoted in Evans's *American Bibliography*. Dr. Owen reproduces this advertisement in his study.

⁵ David Wilfred McCormick, "Oliver Holden, Composer and Anthologist," (unpublished S.M.D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1963), p. 238.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-82.

⁷ The chart appears to be derived from a much earlier tunebook, William Billings's *Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston, 1778), as transmitted in Hans Nathan's introduction to the facsimile edition of Billings's *Continental Harmony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961), p. xi.

⁸ Dr. Owen uses a stylistic matrix based on traditional methods of analysis, which, as with similar analyses of other primitive styles, are not always applicable to early American psalmody.

⁹ See Richard A. Crawford, *Andrew Law, American Psalmist* (Evanston, Illinois, 1968), p. 16.

¹⁰ According to Dr. Owen, the title "The Handell [sic] of Maine" first appeared in the May 10, 1796, edition of *The Tocsin*, a Hallowell, Maine, newspaper. This reference is reproduced in full in Appendix H.

¹¹ Ralph T. Daniel, "Handel Publications in 18th-Century America," *The Musical Quarterly* (1959) 45:168-74, essentially a reprint of the information in Daniel's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Anthem in New England Before 1800," which was published in 1966 by Northwestern University Press; and Virginia Larkin Redway, "Handel in Colonial and Post-Colonial America," *The Musical Quarterly* (1935) 21:190-207. Dr. Owen does not mention either of these articles in his bibliography.

Terence William Bailey—*The Ceremonies and Chants of the Processions of the Western Church: With Particular Attention to the Practice of the Cathedral Church of Salisbury*

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340 pp. text, 33 pp. music, University of Washington diss.)

Charlotte Roederer

"This dissertation proposes to describe and study the ceremonies and chants of the processions of the Western church" (p. 1). With this brief introductory statement Dr. Bailey has proposed an enormous task. The processional repertory is large and diverse, properties which make it an interesting but difficult study. It includes chants which range in style from reciting tone invocations of rogation days to elaborate antiphons of major feasts, antiphons which rival many office responsories in size and complexity. Also included are numerous office chants which double as processional pieces. It is a formidable repertory indeed. Perhaps this is why it has been largely avoided by musicologists despite its importance long acknowledged by students of the medieval carol, the conductus, early polyphony, and liturgical drama.

Dr. Bailey wisely singles out one particular practice for special consideration in Part I, that of Salisbury Cathedral, the Sarum rite, because, as he explains, "the Sarum Use was not only universally admired, it was perhaps the most widespread of any . . ." (p. 1). Furthermore, "Sarum was to have a greater influence in the matter of liturgical customs than any other single church in Europe" (p. 2). Also recommending the Sarum rite "for a study intended to treat the processions in a context larger than the local . . . is (the fact) that the Sarum customs . . . were written up . . . in such a way as to be general in their application" (p. 3). Finally, the sources are plentiful. "There are more than twenty manuscript Sarum Processionals, or fragments, and at least twenty-five printed editions" (p. 14).