

## The Music Herald

*“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”*

*Colossians 3:16*

### Early American Psalmody, Part 1: “Old Slow Church Music”

In this article, we begin a study of early American psalmody that, Lord willing, we will continue over five months. The psalmody of early America is the music that was born of the Reformation and that shaped so much of our heritage. Music has a profound influence upon the lives of those it touches and is a vital part of any culture, and thus, to understand the music of our forefathers is to understand them and to understand the heritage that has continued to influence us down to the present day. With this in view, we take a look at the music that was a part of the lives of the early settlers of America.

The different styles of psalmody in early America have been classified very insightfully and helpfully by Richard Crawford in his study and collection of *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*. He has identified five classes of Psalm tune that make for a neat and logical way to study the early American Psalm tunes. All of these styles have virtue of their own and are useful for conveying different texts. This study is not intended to praise one style above the other, but to give an accurate picture of the different but all worthy styles of tune in early America. In this first article, we look at the first class: the “common-tune style.”

The “common-tune style” is the earliest style of Psalm tune to appear in America. We give a classic sample of this style on page 3 in the tune “Windsor.” Another is the well-known “Old Hundred.” This style is characterized by four elements:

1. Duple Meter
2. Through-Composed Melodic Structure (ABCD)
3. Delivery of the Text in Notes of Equal Value
4. Lack of Written Embellishment

All of these can be seen in the tune “Windsor” on page 3. (1) It is written in the duple meter time signature 2/2. (2) It is a through-composed piece, meaning that the melody never repeats itself from phrase to phrase. (3) Every melody note (in the tenor voice) is a note of equal value — in this case, a half note. (4) There are no written embellishments for any of these half notes; they are all simply given as half notes.

The name of this style, “common tune,” refers to the fact that these tunes were written to be sung with multiple texts. A “proper tune” is written specifically for one text, with which it is always attached, but a “common tune” may be sung to a variety of texts, so long as their poetic meter matches its musical meter.

Because common tunes need to be inter-

changeable with multiple Psalm texts, they must of necessity be somewhat simple. This accounts for many of the characteristics above. Duple meter and notes of equal value make it so that every other syllable is emphasized simply, just as in spoken iambic poetry, without any further emphasis. This allows for any iambic text to be sung to the tune, without fear of distorting its emphasis.

This style of tune was written by mainly English and French composers. It was predominant in America in the 1500s and all the way through the 1600s. This style laid a solid foundation for all the styles that were to follow.

The “common-tune” style of tune has a natural weight and gravity to it by the very nature of its steady, plodding rhythmic motion. This is ideal for conveying the weight and depth of Scripture. But this does not mean that the tunes were always slow and somber. When set with bright and cheerful Psalm texts, they were sung at a sprightly tempo, still retaining the depth of the solid, steady melodies.

As the years went by, these tunes remained as good as ever, but the performance practice degenerated. The tunes were gradually sung slower and slower. Printed music was not readily available, and most of the common people could not read it if they did have it. They were locked in the practice of having a precentor “line out” each line. This interrupted the flow of the tunes and also allowed for much delay and dragging out of the tempo. Here and there, congregations began adding unwritten embellishments, sometimes very ornate. This slowed the tunes down even further, as there had to be enough time for a lengthy embellishment on each half note.

By the early 1700s, these embellishments had degenerated into virtual chaos, and it was clear that reform was needed. In a congregation, individuals would be singing their own embellishments at their own rates, and the song would move very slowly and very imprecisely through the syllables.

As a glimpse of what this embellishment was like, we quote from Thomas Symmes, a pastor at the time, as he describes just how many notes were added as embellishments to the Psalm tune “Canterbury”:

“An Ingenious Gentleman, who has prick’d [notated] Canterbury, as some of you Sing it, finds (as I remember) no less than 150 Notes, in that Tune, in your way [the embellished way], whereas in our’s [the written way], there are but 30.”

It was this chaos that alerted precentors, pastors, and singing masters to the need for singing schools, to train people to read printed music and to sing with accurate pitch and timing.

Singing schools cropped up all over New England and flourished. Tunes were sung as written again, without the ornate embellishments. As the people gained musical literacy, a demand was thus created for new tunes. They still loved their old common tunes, restored to their proper form, and they sang them again with their original simplicity, beauty, and depth. But they now also had the capability of increasing their repertory. Amateur composers sprang up. Some of the tunes they added were in the same common-tune style, but with a bit more complexity in order to challenge their new skills.

We give a sample of one of these on page 4 in the tune “Bangor.” Notice that this tune still has much of the character of the common-tune style, and thus it still is classed as such. It is in the duple meter 2/2, and it has a through-composed melodic structure. But it now varies the half notes by adding some modest embellishments in places. Most of the time, this is done by simply breaking the half note into two quarter notes. One time, it is done more elaborately with eighth notes. All of this reflects a new musical literacy among the common people, but still within the common-tune style.

As time went on, even more complex tunes would spring up, which brings us to the next tune style that we will look at next month.

For now, we close with a tribute to these old,

simple, stately Psalm tunes. Written so long ago, they retain all of their beauty and effectiveness still today. Bartholomew Brown, a composer writing in 1802, intimately familiar with all of the styles that we have yet to cover, and looking back over all of them, made this profound statement about the enduring quality of the old Psalm tunes:

“None will object, that the Music is too dull and antiquated; for, after passing through all the grades of improvement, men will at last come to admire the old slow church Music; and will consider the use of Old Hundred and Windsor, as evidence of a correct taste.”

Indeed, though the new styles have a beauty of their own and a very important place of usefulness of their own, as we will see over the next few months, none surpasses the simple grandeur of the “old slow church Music.” Such tunes as “Old Hundred” are undying and will forever have a vital place in church music.

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Richard Crawford, *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody*, Madison: A-R Editions, Inc., 1984.

Neil Livingston, Reprint of *The Scottish Metrical Psalter*, Glasgow: Maclure & MacDonald, 1864.

David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

Robert Stevenson, *Protestant Church Music in America*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970.

William Tans'ur, *A Compleat Melody*, London: Robert Brown, 1736.

### Windsor

“Windsor,” given on the next page, is one of the greatest tunes of the “common-tune” style. It, along with “Old Hundred,” is one of the tunes held up by Bartholomew Brown as the most worthy examples of the “old slow church Music” and as evidence that such music has a quality and virtue that endures the test of time.

Published first in England in 1591, “Windsor” made its first appearance in America in the *Bay Psalm Book* of 1698. By 1820, it had been reprinted in over one hundred American tune collections and had become one of the most beloved Psalm tunes in print. Samuel Sewell, precentor of the South Church in Boston, recorded this touching display of his own affection for the tune, which was shared by so many: “I set the Windsor Tune [for Psalm 27:7-10] and burst so into Tears that I could scarce continue singing.”

For the sake of clarity, it must be mentioned that this tune is known by the name “Dundee” in Scotland. Apparently, it made its way into Scotland in the early 1600s in the days when tunes had no names. When tunes were assigned names years later, its English origin had been forgotten by the Scottish and they gave it a Scottish name, “Dundee.” The English, however, gave it the name “Windsor.” To add to the confusion, there is another tune called “Dundee” by the English, which is called “French” by the Scottish. In most American hymnals today, the English naming is used, not the Scottish.

The text given here is the one that Samuel Sewall was singing when he was so moved and “burst so into Tears that [he] could scarce continue singing.” It is Tate and Brady’s metrical version of Psalm 27:7-10, the official Psalter used in Anglican churches at the time.

Notice that the melody of “Windsor,” though it never repeats a phrase, does borrow and repeat portions of phrases. In this way, it achieves a beautiful unity with a satisfying blend of variety. Its third phrase begins like the second phrase and ends like the first phrase. And its fourth phrase begins like the first and third phrases end.

For over four hundred years, this tune has conveyed Psalms and hymns in beautiful and fitting tone. It is worthy of its long use and the admiration and affection its strains evoke. It is indeed a choice sample of the “old slow church Music.”

As a sample of the common-tune style, we have given over the next two pages one early sample, “Windsor” (1591), and one late sample, “Bangor” (1735). In both of these, the melody is in the tenor voice, in the third line. Psalm tunes of this era were mostly sung a cappella, and both the top line (called the treble) and also the tenor were sung by both men and women singing an octave apart from each other. In the 1600s and 1700s, the time signature designated not only timing but also tempo; thus for a historically accurate tempo for these songs, they should be sung at a metronome setting of 60.

### WINDSOR C.M.

A Minor Psalm 27:7-10, *A New Version of the Psalms of David*, Tate and Brady, 1698.

*The Former Booke of the Musicke of M. William Damon*, 1591.

1. Con - tin - ue, Lord, to hear my Voice, When - e'er to thee I cry;  
2. When us to seek thy glo - rious Face Thou kind - ly dost ad - vise,  
3. Then hide not thou thy Face, O Lord, Nor me in Wrath re - ject;  
4. Tho' all my Friends and Kin - dred too Their help - less Charge for - sake,  
In Mer - cy my Com - plaints re - ceive, Nor my Re - quest de - ny.  
"Thy glo - rious Face I'll al - ways seek, My grate - ful Heart re - plies."  
My God and Sa - viour, leave not him Thou didst so oft pro - tect.  
Yet thou, whose Love ex - cels them all, Wilt Care and Pi - ty take.

### Bangor

William Tans'ur was one of the amateur composers who arose to supply the demand for new tunes in the early 1700s. He lived and worked in England, and his pieces were taken up and printed across the ocean in New England. His compositions and the theory behind them had a profound influence upon the early New England composers. He was esteemed by one of his contemporaries as being among the “best Authors . . . of the present Age.”

“Bangor” was one of the tunes most frequently sung by the New England colonists of the early 1700s. It was printed over one hundred times in various collections of music from its appearance in 1735 to 1820. Notice that all of the phrases in the melody except the last begin and end on the same note, and yet the tune is not dull and flat. It covers a broad scope with its bold descents and ascents. Each phrase also begins and ends with hollow fifths. This was intentional, in order to achieve a purity of harmony that cannot be achieved when the more dissonant thirds are included. But again, Tans'ur achieved a satisfying progression from rest to unrest and back to rest again by using dissonance and tension where appropriate. As he put it, “Discords, when orderly taken, render the other *Concords* more sweet and delightful.”

The text here set to “Bangor” is one of several that appeared with it over the years with roughly equal frequency. It is Watts' version of Psalm 39. Watts produced his massive work on the Psalms, called *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, in 1719. At first, his Psalms were regarded with skepticism because they are not truly metrical versions of the Psalms, but rather hymns drawn from the Psalms. But very quickly, they became adopted by many churches in America.

Tans'ur's composing was entirely devoted to his Lord. He wrote in the introduction to his book *A Compleat Melody*: "I must confess that our Nation is at this time well stor'd with many good and learned Musicians, who are doubtless better able to have undertaken this Work than myself; But alas! They are most of them (if not all) too Busy in Plays, Operas, &c. than to do any thing to the *Praise of God*; nor yet to have any Regard to encourage such as do." Tans'ur did not follow in that way; he wrote entirely for the praise of God. And thus, with the blessing of God on his work, he left a rich store of music that not only has been useful through the centuries, but also has inspired countless others to similar work. "Bangor" is one of his finest tunes and deserves its place among the greatest of the later imitations of the "old slow Church music."

## BANGOR C.M.

D Minor Isaac Watts, Psalm 39, 2d Part.

William Tans'ur, 1735.

1. Teach me the measure of my days, Thou maker of my frame,  
2. A span is all which we can boast, An inch or two of time:

3. See the vain race of mortals move, Like shadows, o'er the plain,  
4. Some walk in honours' gaudy show; Some dig for golden ore;

5. What could I wish or wait for then, From creatures, earth and dust?  
6. Now I forbid my carnal hope, My fond desires recall;

I would survey life's narrow space, And learn how frail I am.  
Man is but vanity and dust, In all his flow'r and prime.

They rage and strive, desire and love, But all their noise is vain.  
They toil and heirs, they know not who, And straight are seen no more.

They make our expectations vain, And disappoint our trust.  
I give my mortal in'trest up, And make my God my All.

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