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## 'Sing to the Lord a New Song': The Regular Singing Movement in Colonial New England

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# 'Sing to the Lord a New Song': The Regular Singing Movement in Colonial New England

## **Abstract**

“Outward Melody in Religious Singing is no small Help to inward Devotion. In this our imbodyd [sic] State the Senses do very strongly impress the superior Power of the Mind; especially the Ear and Eye do variously affect the Heart.” Cotton Mather penned these words in April of 1721 as part of a sermon that he wrote endorsing Regular Singing, or singing by note rather than by ear. Mather, along with several other Puritan ministers were the driving forces behind the Regular Singing movement, which in essence was a sea change for music in religious services in New England, involving the abandonment of a tradition of lining out psalms for a congregation to sing and introducing books that contained tunes to which psalms could be easily set. Such a change was not implemented quickly or without a battle from both sides, but it ultimately changed the course of Puritan worship forever.

## **Keywords**

John Calvin, regular singing, Puritans, New England

**‘Sing to the Lord a New Song’:  
The Regular Singing Movement in Colonial New England**

*Katie Farrer*

“Outward Melody in Religious Singing is no small Help to inward Devotion. In this our imbodyd [sic] State the Senses do very strongly impress the superior Power of the Mind; especially the Ear and Eye do variously affect the Heart.”<sup>1</sup> Cotton Mather penned these words in April of 1721 as part of a sermon that he wrote endorsing Regular Singing, or singing by note rather than by ear. Mather, along with several other Puritan ministers were the driving forces behind the Regular Singing movement, which in essence was a sea change for music in religious services in New England, involving the abandonment of a tradition of lining out psalms for a congregation to sing and introducing books that contained tunes to which psalms could be easily set.<sup>2</sup> Such a change was not implemented quickly or without a battle from both sides, but it ultimately changed the course of Puritan worship forever.

One of the reforms that John Calvin insisted upon during the Protestant Reformation involved the role of music in public and private worship. He believed that music was an effective and completely valid way to praise God, but only when God himself divinely inspired the texts for the songs. This rhetoric applied most readily to the singing of psalms.<sup>3</sup> Calvin instructed his followers that these psalms should be performed simply, without instrumental

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<sup>1</sup> David McKay, “Cotton Mather’s Unpublished Singing Sermon,” *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 3 September 1975, 420.

<sup>2</sup> “Lining out” meant that the preacher or deacon would speak (or sometimes sing) a line of text before the congregation would sing it. The tradition came about because of a paucity of psalm books, but was continued through the eighteenth century because of a lack of leadership from instrumentalists in Puritan churches. The tradition can be seen today in some gospel music.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Irwin, “The Theology of ‘Regular Singing’” *The New England Quarterly* 51, no. 2, June 1978, 178.

accompaniment, which could lead to “frivolous music lacking moral purpose.”<sup>4</sup> Music, he alleged, should not be judged by its aesthetic beauty, but rather by the level of spirituality it inspired or created.<sup>5</sup> By singing unaccompanied and in unison, Calvin believed that the Protestants could further separate themselves from the Catholics and the pageantry that surrounded their worship services. Such beliefs ultimately led to the Regular Singing debates in Puritan New England churches in the early eighteenth century. The Puritans of New England were primarily Congregationalists, which meant that in order to create a tight-knit religious community, they avoided the hierarchical organization structure of churches that included bishops, synods or presbyteries. They believed that churchgoers should and would be willing to submit to the clergy and other church leaders.<sup>6</sup> This lack of commanding leadership was evident throughout the entire church service, including the parts that called for worship in song. In an effort to free further the Puritans from the level of control that the Catholic Church exerted on its followers, John Cotton and his contemporaries believed that the psalms should be sung with little accompaniment and little direction, so as to diminish opportunities for solo artistry or virtuosic performances.<sup>7</sup>

The melodies for the psalms in the Old Way style of singing were not fixed in a songbook. Typically they were sung to English ballad tunes or something similar that the congregation knew. Because these tunes most frequently were learned through oral transmission, different families, congregations, regions, and countries all had slightly different variations on the same tune. The congregation was given no indication of a meter, key, or general tune, beyond what was “lined out” to them by a deacon, so one can only imagine the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

cacophony that resulted.<sup>8</sup> Some ministers like Cotton Mather believed that members of the congregation could indeed experience rapture by “contemplating the words while singing them,” yet religious leaders spoke out against the “old way” of singing psalms because they saw the disorganized music as shrouding the text.<sup>9</sup> Such ideas led to the singing reform within Puritan churches in 1720, although the actual process began earlier.

A common trend in Puritan worship throughout the seventeenth century was for the congregation to follow a cantor or deacon, who would “line out” every phrase of every verse of a psalm. Lining out became a common tradition through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for gospel music or for folksongs to provide singers with the lines of a song when they did not have written music. It has been credited with permitting more people, including those who may not have been literate or able to read music, to participate in music, but in its seventeenth and early-eighteenth century contexts, it frequently created cacophony among churchgoers.

In a typical Puritan church service, a passage from the Bible that would serve to unite the entire service would be read following the opening prayer. John Cotton wrote that after reading the initial passage, he “expoundeth it, giving the sense, to cause the people to understand the reading.”<sup>10</sup> This passage would be referenced again in the minister’s sermon, but also in other aspects of the following two to three hours during which time the congregation would be worshipping. It was not uncommon for “forty or fifty scriptures [to be] distinctly quoted in one discourse” (sermon) and for there to be many indirect references as well.<sup>11</sup>

What was the purpose for this concentrated emphasis on scripture within a Puritan worship service? The Bible recorded the words of God and therefore itself was a means of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, 110-111.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

grace. Therefore, the singing of psalms provided an additional “emotional outlet for the pious” although not always an aesthetically pleasing experience for those who were musically inclined.<sup>12</sup> Lining out the psalm verses also reinforced the centrality of scripture in Puritan worship because congregation members, especially in churches that did not have songbooks, had to listen, internalize, and then repeat the lines. Therefore, as John Cotton believed, “the end of singing is . . . to instruct, and convince, and to reprove the wicked,” in other words, to guide those singing or listening to the music in the way of the Lord.<sup>13</sup> Cotton Mather would express similar sentiments a generation later in writing, “It is wonderfully fitted to brighten the Mind, and warm the Heart, to enliven and refresh all our Powers and cherish every holy Frame, to calm and silence our evil noisy Passions, to actuate and invigorate pious and devotional Affections. And hence religious Singing is a good Preparatory for other subsequent Parts of Divine Service; and tends to render the Word and ordinances more improving and advantagious.”<sup>14</sup>

The psalm texts could be sung directly from the Bible itself, but for the sake of music and economics, were more frequently sung from psalm books, because these books were less expensive than Bibles. The first psalm book used in New England was brought by the Pilgrims from Europe and was written in Amsterdam in 1612 by Henry Ainsworth. Not only did it contain a metrical version of the psalms, but *The Book of Psalms* also included annotations at the end of each psalm to provide opportunities for those who desired a deeper understanding of the texts, as well as the outlines for thirty-nine tunes that should be used in the singing of the psalms.<sup>15</sup> The version was used at least through the 1690s, when many ministers decided the

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<sup>12</sup> Louis B. Wright, *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies: 1607-1763* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 192.

<sup>13</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, 113.

<sup>14</sup> David P. McKay, “Cotton Mather’s Unpublished Singing Sermon” in *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Sept. 1975), 417.

<sup>15</sup> Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1891), 126-132 passim.

tunes in the Ainsworth version were too difficult to sing and the *Bay Psalm Book* was adopted almost universally within the New England colonies.

*The Whole Book of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Meter*, henceforth referred to as *The Bay Psalm Book*, was the first book to be printed in New England in 1640. The following was printed on the cover page in later editions: “Whereunto is prefixed a discourse declaring not only the lawfullnes [sic], but also the necessity of the Heavenly Ordinance of Singing Psalmes in the Churches of God.”<sup>16</sup> The *Bay Psalm Book* was created and compiled by three Massachusetts Bay clergy members (Thomas Symmes, Thomas Walter, and Richard Mather) and was the catalyst in the movement towards standardizing psalmody, and later singing in general within the services. Because the authors were so well educated, they were able to study texts such as the Ainsworth psalm book, the Geneva Bible, and the Bible in Hebrew to determine the best translation of every word, line, and phrase rather than merely paraphrasing the psalms from the Geneva Bible as previous versions had. Its success is credited to this translation, which permitted congregation members to sing in the vernacular so that what they were experiencing in musical worship was as understandable and accurate as possible.

The psalms were intended to be sung by everyone, to “join together in heart and voice to praise the Lord, for as David’s psalms have been showed, were sung in heart and voice together by the twenty-four orders of the musicians of the temple.”<sup>17</sup> The authors argued that the psalms should be translated as they were in this book to mirror the poetic nature of the original Hebrew texts. They defended their work by writing in the preface that all lines may not be as smooth as expected or desired because they chose to pursue a colloquial translation and to refrain from

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 144; Hambrick-Stowe, 111.

<sup>17</sup> “The Preface” from *The Bay Psalm Book*, imprinted 1640, modern edition: (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 6. I have taken the liberty to quote this passage in twenty-first century English, rather than as was printed in the original *Bay Psalm Book*.

paraphrase “so we may sing in Zion the Lord’s songs of praise according to his own will; until he takes us from hence, and wipes away all our tears, and bids us enter into our master’s joy to sing eternal Hallelujahs.”<sup>18</sup>

For example, verses one through three of the Twenty-Third Psalm in the *Bay Psalm Book* read:

The Lord to me a shepherd is,  
Want therefore shall not I.  
He in the folds of tender-grass,  
Doth cause me down to lie:  
To waters calm me gently leads  
Restore my soul doth he:  
He doth in paths of righteousness:  
For his namesake leads me.<sup>19</sup>

This brief example exhibits the poetic nature of the familiar psalm. Its structure, which more closely resembles a poem than a passage of scripture, demonstrates how easily it might lend itself to song. This accessibility was attractive not only to churches as a whole but also to individual members who used *The Bay Psalm Book* in personal devotion as well. Such a setting for the songs was so accessible for New Englanders because it mirrored ballads, which surely were sung throughout the region, preserved orally by immigrants from Europe or created and transmitted within the colonies.

Devotional singing was permitted and encouraged in colonial New England because like congregational singing, it placed the worshipper on a level that was closer to God and His kingdom. The prominence of the *Bay Psalm Book* throughout New England permitted Puritans the opportunity to worship at home with the same music and texts as they experienced in church,

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<sup>18</sup> *The Bay Psalm Book*, 5. Zion is often used as a reference to heaven or a resting place at the end of a religious journey such as a pilgrimage. In this case, Mather seems to be referring to New England, a peaceful, holy resting place one resides before reaching heaven.

<sup>19</sup> *The Bay Psalm Book*. This translation is opposed to the King James Version of the Bible, which was completed in 1611: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters: he restoreth my soul. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

but in a more comfortable setting. Restrictions on personal and private worship were also much more lax—so much that Puritans were permitted to even write their own songs (assuming, naturally that they were religiously-based) and perform them and various psalms with instrumental accompaniment. According to John Cotton, “Any private Christian, who hath a gift to frame a spiritual song, may both frame it, and sing it privately, for his own private comfort, and remembrance of some special benefit and deliverance.”<sup>20</sup> The musical instruments were permitted so long as their presence did not interfere with an individual’s or family’s devotional worship by obscuring the text.

It is somewhat ironic that the book that began the motion towards the Regular Singing controversy within the Puritan community did not actually contain any music. The first sign of actual music or suggestion for worship practices using *The Bay Psalm Book* did not appear until 1698, nearly sixty years after its first printing. This means that although the psalms had been altered to make their singing easier, congregations still had to rely on the process of lining out the tunes, which did not change the cacophony of voices for the better in any sense. It would seem that during the period between the first version and the version that contained music, Cotton and the other authors were somewhat ambivalent about the musical crisis in the churches. Their purpose in writing the psalm book was to make it more possible for everyone to participate in musical worship within a church service and enable them to experience God’s grace through song.<sup>21</sup> For as long as possible, a “hands-off” approach was taken to controlling the singing for fear of creating an environment that was governed by rules, orders, and hierarchy, which suggested Catholicism.

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<sup>20</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Reverend Thomas Walter, a writer in seventeenth-century New England recorded, “The tunes are now miserably tortured and twisted and quavered . . . into a horrid Medly of confused and disorderly Voices. Our tunes are left the Mercy of every unskilful [sic] Throat to chop and alter, to twist and change, according to their infinitely divers [sic] and no less Odd Humours and Fancies . . . no two Men in the Congregation quaver alike or together . . . it sounds like *five hundred* different Tunes roared out at the same time.”<sup>22</sup> Frustrations with and criticisms of the creative interpretation of psalm tunes grew more frequent, particularly among clergy members or musically literate throughout the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Puritan ministers began to fear that the “Jarrs [sic] and Discords and Howling” resulting from old style singing and individual embellishments and interpretations of psalm tunes were weakening the power of the words being sung.<sup>23</sup> Ministers began to grow concerned with the singing practices as the weekly cacophonies escalated. They began to fear that the Old Way of singing was dangerous to their faith because although the psalms were set to music, the actual texts were becoming obscured. After all, since the words brought congregation members closer to God, what would happen if He could not understand them on account of the discordant music?

So at what point did ministers and other leaders in Puritan New England decide that a change needed to be made in the musical part of worship? The 1698 version of *The Bay Psalm Book* was the first American psalter (book of psalms) to include not only tunes, but also recommendations on ways to control one’s voice, as well as helping people “avoid squeaking above or grumbling below” the intended psalm tunes.<sup>24</sup> But these suggestions would serve as

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<sup>22</sup> Alice Morse Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1891), 205

<sup>23</sup> Cynthia Adams Hoover, “Music and Theater in the Lives of Eighteenth-Century Americans” in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Cary Carson, Richard Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1994), 319.

<sup>24</sup> Daniels, 54.

ammunition for the debate involving the changes in singing practices in Puritan churches for at least the next sixty years.

As the seventeenth century progressed, the congregations lost or forgot the tunes that were supposed to accompany the psalms. No musical instruction within the churches existed, so individual interpretations of the tunes continued to be perpetuated within the services. By the 1720s, however, the debate over singing by rote (by having someone line out verses) or by notated psalm tunes escalated. The lines had been drawn, between rural conservative communities and “urbane, liberal one[s] centered in the large towns.”<sup>25</sup> The intellectual urbanites (mostly clergy members) that supported regular singing did so in order to combat what they perceived as laxity within the Puritan churches. It would seem that they could no longer support or recognize the cacophony that arose from their congregations every Sunday morning and afternoon as worshipful and or devotional. They saw the old style of singing as fostering confusion, which would not please God nearly as much as orderly music making might.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the congregation members tended to argue for the Old Way out of fear of ritualizing their worship services as the Catholics had. In 1723, one such person wrote in the *New England Chronicle*, “Truly I have a great jealousy that if we begin to *sing* by rule, the next thing will be to *pray* by rule and *preach* by rule and *then comes popery*.”<sup>27</sup> Although the debate may seem rather simplistic on paper, it is important to note that the clergy and congregation members were not merely arguing over how a psalm would be sung in worship, they were, in essence, struggling over the acceptance of a movement away from orthodox Calvinism to Puritanism influenced by “rationalism, Pietism, and Baroque thought.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Earle, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, 208-209.

<sup>28</sup> Irwin, “The Theology of Regular Singing,” 177.

For many, regular singing was not only haunted by the threat of papacy, but also an intrusion of the secular world into a sacred sphere. If people were taught to sing reading from notes, what was to prevent them from adding secular music to their newly acquired musical repertoire? Furthermore, what was to prevent them from singing such songs within the meetinghouse?<sup>29</sup> Therefore, although some churches quickly embraced their new musical traditions, most congregational reforms did not occur overnight, as may be referenced by the thirty-one sermons discussing the validity of Regular Singing within a Puritan church service published between 1721 and 1730. The confusion, arguments, and ambiguity on the matter can be viewed as a direct result of democratic organization of the Puritan church. The change to Regular Singing would have been much easier if a bishop or a pope could have distributed a decree demanding congregations to adopt “note singing,” but instead congregations had to compose their own policies, based on popular vote.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, to say that change came slowly to most congregations would be an understatement. Objections to regular singing appeared in churches until at least the Revolutionary era. Despite Cotton Mather’s instruction that “the Christian and the musician must bear each other company. The one must not say to the other, I have no need of thee,” there are records of people in a church in Westfield, Massachusetts, in 1769 of walking out of services because they felt such strong opposition to the new style of singing.<sup>31</sup> Alice Morse Earle described another scenario in *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, “The impetuous and well-trained singers at first cut off the last word only of the deacon’s ‘lining;’ they then encroached a

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<sup>29</sup> Crawford, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; Daniels, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Daniels, 56.

word or two further, and finally sung boldly on without stopping at all to be ‘deaconed.’”<sup>32</sup>

Parishes took different approaches to introducing Regular Singing as a result of their autonomy, however. In 1770, one church decided that the choir could “sing once on the Lord’s Day without reading by the Deacon” and another church decided to allow a deacon to lead the psalms in the morning while the singing school had control over the music in the afternoon. Both cases inevitably led to the new singing tradition being permanently introduced into the service, but only after each congregation voted on the matter.<sup>33</sup>

John Calvin taught that only songs revealed by God himself in the Old Testament and sung unaccompanied and in unison were worthy of being sung in church. His teachings did not differ radically from that of Plato, who believed that in music, the text should subordinate harmony and rhythms. For over a century, Puritans staunchly embraced these beliefs, even when laxity in membership requirements and definitions of the conversion experience prevailed in the churches.<sup>34</sup> However, in the early-eighteenth century, New England clergy believed they no longer needed to be concerned with the polyphonic excesses that once plagued Protestant and Catholic worship services.

Thomas Symmes, one of the original authors of *The Bay Psalm Book*, was one of the first people to defend the presence of artistry in worship by arguing “one does not fulfill Scripture merely by singing, but rather by singing skillfully.”<sup>35</sup> He further supported his arguments with references to scripture, like I Corinthians 14:15b: “I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” and I Chronicles 15:22, which could be the first reference of a singing school: “Kenaniah the head Levite was In charge of the singing that was his responsibility because he

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<sup>32</sup> Earle, 214. This passage refers to the process of lining out and how choir members would assert their power and knowledge to encourage others into singing via note as well.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

<sup>34</sup> Irwin, 178; Daniels, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Irwin, 183.

was skillful at it.” He saw these verses as indications that the effects of singing within a worship service were improved when performed skillfully.<sup>36</sup> People like Tufts, as well as Thomas Walter, Thomas Symmes, and of course, Cotton Mather, endorsed similar ideas upon writing *The Bay Psalm Book*. They published their own sermons on the matter, sermons that all reflect a sentiment in which music need not appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions, but that “passions and affections ‘are subservient to the same designs of religions and devotion’ as the intellect and will” because in order to be effective, the heart must believe what the mouth is singing.<sup>37</sup> This, according to the Puritans fighting for a change in psalmody, was most possible when the mouth was making beautiful and aesthetically pleasing music to accompany God’s divinely beautiful words. In other words, merely singing in the old way was denying gifts that God had given his people to cherish and use. Mather expressed similar sentiments when he wrote in a singing sermon that was posthumously published, “And We would now call upon All capable of it, and particularly the Rising Generation among us, to improve the Advantages They have in their Hands to learn the Rules of Singing, I exhort Them to take Pains for the acquiring some competent Skill; that this part of Divine Worship may be more generally attended [sic] and more decently performed in Times to come.”<sup>38</sup>

However liberal Mather might have appeared in terms of adopting the Regular Singing practices, he, like Calvin, was still staunchly opposed to the introduction of instruments into a Puritan meetinghouse.<sup>39</sup> Just as many of the members in his congregations feared that singing by note would introduce elements of the secular world into their sacred realm, so did Mather fear

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Irwin, 185, 188.

<sup>38</sup> McKay, 418.

<sup>39</sup> Daniels, 56.

that instruments would encourage “dancing as well as playing in the aisles.”<sup>40</sup> However, one must not interpret this quote as believing that Puritans did not endorse instrumental music for private or social uses. Quite the contrary occurred, actually. Instruments were owned by everyone from merchants to craftsmen and isolated farmers, and could even be used for individual devotional worship, so long as the presence of instrumental accompaniment did not interfere with the sacred texts. A generation before Cotton Mather, John Cotton wrote “singing with Instruments was typicall, and so ceremoniall worship . . . singing with heart and voice is morall worship, such as is written in the hearts of all men by nature.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, to John Cotton, singing with instruments was fine if celebrating certain event with a ceremony, but when a Puritan was worshipping, instruments ought not to interfere in the communication between the individual and God himself.

Despite the strong endorsements that Puritan ministers put forth for Regular Singing, they soon discovered that increased musical literacy within their congregations created changes beyond merely the way in which the psalms were sung. The musical literacy inspired by the Regular Singing Movement within the Puritan church spawned the creation of choirs and the “fostering of independent musical tastes,” which soon spiraled out of the clergy’s control.<sup>42</sup> This said, however, the change to this new style of music making was typically not quite as drastic or severe as the examples that have been previously presented might suggest. It was not uncommon for a person or several congregation members who were interested in learning the finer points of singing by note to attend a singing school and after learning “to sing according to rule,” they may have demonstrated their newly-found musical skills in a church service to fellow congregation members, perhaps thus persuading them of the benefits of Regular Singing and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hambrick-Stowe, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Crawford, 34.

convincing the congregation to vote in favor of adopting Regular Singing practices in all services of worship.<sup>43</sup>

Thomas Clap, the president of Yale from 1740 until 1766, believed that it was “the duty of all persons to sing” and to “learn to sing by Rule” because all who were not “idiots may learn to Read, or to Cypher.” In other words, those who could not sing or read music ought to learn so that the musical portions of church services may have full participation.<sup>44</sup> So that everyone might learn musical skills, singing schools were established in most New England communities. The institution of such schools was inspired by works similar to *A Very Plain and Easy Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes*, written by John Tufts first in 1714 and popular enough to have eleven editions published.<sup>45</sup>

On its most innocent level, the singing school was designed to help people do all of these things. American singing schools, beginning in the 1740s, were led by music teachers and were held in the evenings so as to not interfere with daily commitments or chores. They were temporary in nature—designed to only last two or three months (just long enough to introduce beginning musicians to rudimentary elements of Regular Singing) and were aimed at those who had had no previous musical training.<sup>46</sup> A social aspect was included within the schools from their inception. Schools typically held at least two classes for students of different ages and these students were drawn from nearly every element of the social strata. By the 1750s and 1760s, their popularity surged and the schools were frequently oversubscribed. In addition to the concerts or “singing lessons” that would occur at the end of their three month period, singing

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>44</sup> Hoover, 319-320. Clap was a congregational minister prior to becoming the president of Yale College. He established the Church of Christ of Yale College and insisted that following presidents also publicly endorse the Westminster Catechism. Such establishments led to student rebellions and ultimately his resignation. Bruce P. Stark, “Thomas Clap” from “Connecticut’s Heritage Gateway” accessed 13 November 2003. <<http://www.ctheritage.org/encyclopedia/ctto1763/clap.htm>>

<sup>45</sup> Wright, 192. This book also contained approximately thirty psalm tunes that could be sung to the scripture.

<sup>46</sup> Crawford, 32.

schools became known for their fun and frivolity, among other things.<sup>47</sup> One young man recorded in his diary his feelings about the singing school that he attended: “I have no inclination for anything for I am almost sick of the world and were it not for the hope of going to singing-meeting tonight and indulging myself in some of the carnal delights of the flesh, such as kissing, squeezing, etc., I should surely leave it now.”<sup>48</sup> Students at Yale University shared similar sentiments about the singing schools, as they viewed the “weekly singing meeting, which they attended not only to make music” but to also escape from scholarly life and partake in some of the “carnal desires of the flesh” that have already been discussed.<sup>49</sup>

Although the singing schools only lasted for a few months at a time, it was not uncommon for students who attended them to continue singing as a group, and in doing so improve their vocal quality and ability to read notes, by performing the music on which they had been concentrating.<sup>50</sup> As the performances grew more and more frequent, the groups developed into a meetinghouse choir, which brought “energy and musical diversity” to worship services, but also disrupted the hierarchical seating patterns of the congregation members and for some parishioners, they became a source of distraction because they turned psalmody into a display of human talents rather than into an element of sacred worship. In some cases, the worship services turned into a musical competition between the choir (who was not content to sing “those plain and easy Compositions” that the congregations sang) and the congregation. By the mid-1760s, it was not uncommon for specialty choirs to be present within a congregation. These choirs sat together, typically in the church gallery, and sang music other than the psalm tunes that had originally been designated for the purpose of music in worship. As tunebooks containing

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<sup>47</sup> Daniels, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Hoover, 321.

<sup>50</sup> Crawford, 34.

compositions by William Billings, Isaac Watts, or other New England “tunesmiths” gained prominence throughout the region, these choirs began singing more elaborate music that in some occasions even contained polyphony and fugue-like sections.<sup>51</sup>

It is nevertheless important to recognize the impact that singing schools had on music in the colonies. Many New Englanders did not have the means to pay for music lessons that represented the European “high art” style, nor were they especially interested in obtaining the skills needed to play or sing the music properly. Singing schools were attractive because they not only provided a Puritan with the basics needed to sing music by note, but they also presented an opportunity beyond Sundays meetings during which neighbors and congregation members could come together and socialize.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the tunebook that had the most influence on sacred music in New England since *The Bay Psalm Book* in 1640 was *The New-England Psalm-Singer: or, American Chorister*, written in 1770 by William Billings, a Boston tanner and singing master. It was the first tunebook that contained only the music of one composer, and this is especially significant because that one composer was American born and bred.<sup>53</sup> If anyone was in any doubt as to on which continent he and his loyalties resided, one needed to only examine the titles of the songs as they referenced Massachusetts towns and cities, Boston churches and streets, and even expressions such as freedom, liberty, and union.<sup>54</sup>

Musicians appreciated Billings works because the composer wrote interesting musical lines for all of the vocal parts, rather than merely the soprano or the tenor, which seemed to be rather customary in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Billings described the challenges

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<sup>51</sup> Hoover, 321.

<sup>52</sup> Daniels 62-63.

<sup>53</sup> Crawford, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

involved in undertaking such efforts by writing, “The grand difficulty in composition is to preserve the air through each part separately, and yet cause them to harmonize with each other at the same time.”<sup>55</sup> His work gained popularity because *The New-England Psalm-Singer* was published in the same year as the Boston Massacre. The tunebook contained religious as well as patriotic music and on occasion combined them, as was the case in one of Billings’ most popular tunes, “Chester.” Billings’ music excited choir members and other musicians because he was able to present successfully “a confluence of independent, interlocking melodic lines [that were] . . . tailored to fit metrical verse,” an important part of Puritan worship since *The Bay Psalm Book*.<sup>56</sup>

Most churches did not jump immediately from *The Bay Psalm Book* to *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, because in the period of over a century that separated the two tunebooks, other sacred musical developments were made. Isaac Watts, for example wrote *Hymns and Spiritual Songs, in Three Books* between 1707 and 1709 and followed this with *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* in 1719. These sources gained popularity and notoriety in Great Britain and then the colonies. They were at first nearly scandalous because Watts’ versions of the psalms and hymns, despite being quite singable, “departed too far from literal translation.”<sup>57</sup> Although some Protestant groups, like the Presbyterians, refused to sing the hymns until well into the nineteenth century for these reasons, most had accepted and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>56</sup> Crawford, 42-44. The lyrics to verses 1, 3, and 4 of “Chester” read: “Let tyrants shake their iron rod. / And Slav’ry clank her galling chain, / We fear them not we trust in God. / New England’s God forever reigns. / The Foe comes on with haughty Stride. / Our troops advance with martial noise, / Their Vet’rans flee before our Youth. / And Gen’rals yield to beardless boys. / What grateful Off’ring shall we bring, / What shall we render to the Lord, / Loud Hallelujahs let us Sing. / And praise his name on ev’ry Chord.” The verses contain four-line stanzas.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, 193.

incorporated these tunebooks into their elements of worship much earlier. Hence, Watts paved the way for William Billings and hundreds of composers of sacred music to come.<sup>58</sup>

From this point, it was not a surprise to soon find organs and other instruments as playing a major part in Puritan worship services. However, it was not until 1770, the same year as Billings' *New-England Psalm-Singer* was introduced, when the Congregational Church of Providence became the first Puritan church to allow an organ. Its introduction into Puritan worship was so reluctant and gradual because of the instrument's connection to the Roman Catholic Church, as well as secular entertainment.<sup>59</sup> However, taking into account that "simplicity and scripturalism were the fundamental principles of Puritan worship, then regular singing, which was based on principles of beauty, reason, and the natural order" was completely foreign to the Puritans, it is rather easy to understand the long progression of changing from singing by rote to singing by note and why more sacred tunesmiths did not make names for themselves earlier than Isaac Watts or William Billings.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, it would be impossible to say that *The Bay Psalm Book*, William Billings' compositions, singing schools, or the forward-thinking Puritan clergy were singularly responsible for sparking the Regular Singing Movement. Rather all of these elements had to and did combine at the right time in colonial New England in order to increase the musical literacy of that region and to give America her own musical heritage.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Daniels, 60.

<sup>60</sup> Irwin, 192.