

Consistency and Change in American Colonial Religious Music

Merrily Kelsey

Liberty University

Method, Research Questions, & Findings

Method:

Textual study of primary and secondary source literature; information synthesized

Questions:

- What types of religious music were employed by American colonists?
- What similarities and differences existed between religious, denomination, and ethnic groups?
- Did locality (north, south, specific colony) affect music selection?
- How was religious music preserved and developed over the time period?
- Who contributed to the consistency and changes in colonial church music?

Findings:

- Variations in religious music at start
- One major form of music consistently used across lines
- Revisions and additions along the way
- Consistency and change across denominations, ethnic groups, space, and time
- Multiple contributing factors

Purposes of Colonial Religious Music

Reasons Given by Colonists

- Glorify and honor God
- Duty
- Guide liturgical form
- Propagate faith
- Lift thoughts to God
- Teach doctrine
- Instruct
- Admonish
- Comfort and encourage
- Give praise and thanks
- Learn Word
- Be revived or awakened

References Cited by Colonists

Psalm 100:1-2

“Make a joyfull noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before his presence with singing.”

Ephesians 5:19

“Speaking to your selves, in Psalmes, and Hymnes, and Spirituall songs, singing and making melodie in your heart to the Lord.”

Authorized King James Version 1611

Propagate/Share Faith

Missionary Preparation and Activity

Spaniards

French

English

Example of Priest Provisions for Missions
(Alonso de Benavides's list):

3 Choir books

5 Ritual books

5 Mass and vesper choir books

5 Antiphonaries

5 Bells

5 Sets of missals

1 Set of chirimias

1 Bajon

- **Spaniards**

- Franciscan Priests in south and west

- Taught chants, part songs, liturgy, devotion songs, hymns
- Formed boys' choirs
- Instructed in making and playing instruments
- Presented pageants with a medley of Latin plainsong, Spanish air, and native Indian melodies

- **French**

- Jesuit priests in north, south, and midwest

- Taught chants, liturgy, monophonic mass, psalms, hymns, Christmas noels
- Formed boys' choirs
- Used some orchestra instruments
- Taught males and females
- Service in Iroquois; Composed a canticle/psalm book in Nahautl language

- Huguenots in south

- Taught psalmody

- **English**

- Protestants and Independents from north to south

- Taught psalms and other songs along with Bible
- Translated Psalms to Indian verse and included with translation of New Testament in Algonquin

Styles and Presentations of Religious Music

Formal and Informal Styles

- Chants
- Plainsong
- Response
- Psalms
- Choral pieces
- Hymns
- Spiritual Songs
- Fuges
- Folk Tunes
- Spirituals
- Orchestral Numbers

In Church

- Memory
- Printed books
- Chanting
- Singing melody only
- Harmony and part singing
- Choirs
- Solos
- Voices only
- Instruments with voice
- Lining out

Psalters and Psalmody

Start to Finish

- Originals
 - From Old World
 - First book printed in America
- Languages
 - Hebrew
 - Latin
 - English
 - Dutch
 - French
 - Scottish
 - German
 - Tribal
- Revisions
 - Improve clarity, textual accuracy, flow of words
 - Musical notations
 - Additional melodies
 - Parts and harmony
 - Scriptural songs
 - Hymns
 - Spiritual songs
 - Christmas Noels

Group to Group

- Religions/Church Affiliations

- Jew
- Catholic
- Anglican
- Other Protestant and Independent

- Colony

- Virginia; Anglicans
- Plymouth; Pilgrims
- Massachusetts Bay; Puritans

- Cultural/Ethnic

- European American
- Native American
- African American

“most instructive lessons of Piety, to the Jewish and Christian Church”

“the fire and spirit of the Hebrew poetry cannot be extinguished in the most literal and prosaic version” Aphorhp

Discussions and Contributions

Reasons

- Questions about appropriate use of music in church
 - Silently inside self
 - Only members participate
 - Women keep silence
 - Just Psalms
 - Include instruments
 - Solos
 - Restricted to Scripture
 - Proper attitude
- Deterioration of Music
 - Harmony dropped
 - Lack of musical notation
 - Lack of training
 - Lining out

Messages

- Preachers spoke and wrote pamphlets
 - Duty to sing
 - All should participate
 - Solos acceptable
 - Instruments included in Scripture
 - All Scripture acceptable text
 - Devotion and personal testimony allowable
 - Humble, respectful, enthusiastic attitude
 - Honor God with improved quality, not just noise

Instruction Books

- Description of music
- Purpose for church music
- Style and form
- Reading musical notation
- Singing parts

Singing Schools

- Instruct in music
- Practice
- Prepare choirs

Music Reform

- Began with psalters in 1640
- Pursued in earnest in 1700s
- Preceded and coincided with widespread evangelistic services of the Great Awakening

Conclusion

- American colonial religious music showed consistency and change across church affiliations, nationalities, living space, and time
- Contributions were made by diverse groups and individuals; Protestant, Catholic, and Jew; European, Native, and African American
- Psalm-singing was the most common and consistent form of music
- Religious music reflected beliefs, common practices, and preferences of the people
- Further study would be beneficial in understanding American colonists as a whole, in specific groups, and in relation to others

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