

CREATION

William Billings (1746-1800)

Text: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

First verse: Psalm 139, Second verse: Hymn ii:19 (CM)

From *The Continental Harmony* (1794)

BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM NOTES

William Billings (1746-1800) was a Boston tanner and singing master (a traveling singing teacher) who lived and worked in the post-revolutionary United States. Though most likely self-taught as a composer, his compositions have had a lasting impact on choral music, especially in the U.S.

Creation was first published in William Billings' last collection of songs called *The Continental Harmony* in 1794.

Creation has many of the elements typical to Billings' style – melody in the tenor line, simple harmonies, open fifths.

An interesting side note on the text:

In 2002, historian of science Edward B. Davis (co-editor of *The Works of Robert Boyle*) discovered that Watts based the second stanza on a meditation by the famous chemist Robert Boyle. In that text, from *Occasional Reflections Upon Several Subjects* (1665), Boyle reflected on an illness from which he had recovered, noting the great complexity of the human body and the wonder of how it all stays so well for so many years.¹

A note about performance practice: The shape note tradition of singing is alive and well today. Many groups around the country get together regularly to sing tunes from *The Sacred Harp* and other tunebooks. These groups exist for the pure joy of singing these songs and the sense of community created when

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Creation (William Billings)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 2 May. 2017. Web. 28 May. 2017.

based on research found in Edward B. Davis, "Robert Boyle as the Source of an Isaac Watts Text set for a William Billings Anthem," *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song*, 53 (2002), 46-7

people sing together. They do not rehearse and they do not perform - they simply sing. For this reason, the simple act of performing these songs on a stage with an audience, in a sense goes against current performance practice. It is not our intention then, to present tonight's performance of these songs as "authentic", but only to perform them as beautifully as we can.

LYRICS

When I with pleasing wonder stand,
 And all my frame survey,
 Lord, 'tis they work, I own they hand,
 Thus build my humble clay.

Our life contains a thousand springs,
 And dies if one be gone.
 Strange that a harp of thousand strings
 Should keep in tune so long.

RECORDINGS

His Majestie's Clerkes: [Creation](#)

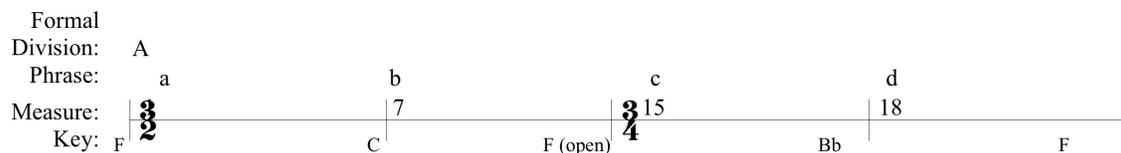
ANALYSIS

Key: F Major

Meter: Changes several times

Form: Sectional

Verse 1 (or the A section) is diagrammed below. This entire verse is in chorale-style or block harmony. The B section is described below – it doesn't lend itself quite so well to illustrations.



Verse 2 (B section).

Ms. 22-29 – Meter in 3/2. Periodic phrase construction (two phrases). Block harmony.

Ms. 30-60 – Meter in 2/2. Polyphonic texture with considerable imitative counterpoint, particularly the rhythmic gesture on the words “strange that a harp”.

Ms. 55-60 return to block harmony.