

## *Jordan*

William Billings (1746-1800)

Lyrics: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

from *The Suffolk Harmony* (1786)

## *Recordings*

William Appling Singers, 2015: [https://youtu.be/mWOuOvrY\\_w4](https://youtu.be/mWOuOvrY_w4)

His Majestie's Clerkes, "Early American Choral Music, Vol. 1" conducted by Paul Hillier: <https://youtu.be/IZZt5jkjTAM>

## *Analysis*

Key: A Major

Meter: 2/2

Form: Strophic

Structured in 4 8-measure phrases, AA'BA"; tenors have melody

## *Background*

*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 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 try to sing these songs in a manner that might be considered authentic performance practice, but to sing them in a way that respectfully reflects the traditions.

**For more information about Sacred Harp and the shape note singing tradition:**

**Locally:** <http://www.freude.com/fasola/>

**National and Research:** a good place to start is <http://fasola.org/>

## *The Composer*

The following information about composer William Billings comes from the Art of the States website:

"William Billings (1746-1800) is considered one of the first significant composers of the United States. He composed and published over 340 choral pieces during his lifetime, and was a well-known singing master in and around his native Boston, Massachusetts. From his many published writings Billings manifested a strong personality:

"For my own Part, as I don't think myself confin'd to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me, neither should I think (were I to pretend to lay down Rules) that any who came after me were any ways obligated to adhere to them, any further than they should think proper: So in fact, I think it is best for every Composer to be his own Carver."

The work of Billings and other composers of the period formed the foundation of what would later become shape-note or Sacred Harp singing, a tradition that migrated to the southern and western United States and continues to the present day.

The son of a Boston shopkeeper, Billings had a limited education, likely receiving musical instruction at local singing schools; he is believed to have been largely self-taught in composition. Billings was 13 when his father died, and supported his family by working as a tanner, converting animal hides into leather, a trade which he practiced throughout his life. He began teaching in singing schools in 1769, and over the next decade became a highly-respected and successful singing master in leading Boston churches. Billings had a striking appearance: he was blind in one eye, had a withered arm, a short leg, and a loud voice, and inhaled large quantities of snuff (powdered tobacco).

In 1770 Billings published *The New England Psalm-Singer*, the first collection of entirely original pieces written by a composer in the United States. It included a cover engraved by Billings' friend Paul Revere (one of the major figures of the US War of Independence), an essay on the rudiments of music by the composer, and over 120 psalm and hymn tunes. Several of these tunes were widely published and performed, including "Brookfield" and the popular Revolutionary War song "Chester." In the early 1770's Billings taught at singing schools in nearby Weymouth and Stoughton, Massachusetts (where he met and married singer Lucy Swan) as well as in Providence, Rhode Island.

Billings' next tunebook, *The Singing Master's Assistant* (1778), was his most successful: it went through four editions and saw nearly two-thirds of its songs appear in later collections. Published during the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), it contained another lengthy instructional preface, many psalm and hymn tunes, and nine long-form compositions. Billings followed it soon after with two additional works: *Music in Miniature* (1779), a tune supplement aimed for use in church congregations, and *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (1781), written for more advanced singers. The latter contains his most experimental work, the concert piece "Modern Music."

Billings continued to teach in singing schools, published several literary pamphlets and occasional pieces including his enduring *An Anthem for Easter* (1787), and edited the first issue of the *Boston Magazine* (1783). Important tunebooks of the time, *The Chorister's Companion* (1782) and *The Worcester Collection* (1786), featured more works by Billings than any other composer. His fifth collection *The Suffolk Harmony* (1786), included the popular song "Jordan." By the late 1780's Billings' fortunes had turned, forcing him to work in a number of Boston municipal jobs in addition to his musical and tanning trades: hogreeve (officer in charge of impounding stray hogs), scavenger (trash collector), and sealer of leather (leather inspector). A benefit concert was held for him in 1790, and his final tunebook *The Continental Harmony* (1794) was published as an act of charity through the advance subscription of citizens of Boston. Billings died in 1800 and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Art of the States, Emmaus, <http://www.artofthestates.org/cgi-bin/piece.pl?pid=268>,

## ***Program Notes***

*Jordan* was first published in William Billings' tunebook, *The Suffolk Harmony* (1786). Billings (1746-1800), a Boston tanner and singing master (a traveling singing teacher) 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. *Jordan* was popular while Billings was alive. Musically it is surprisingly forward-thinking in both form "(aaba: statement-restatement-contrast-altered return) and mode of text declamation (decorated duple)." <sup>2</sup>

### ***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 tune books. These groups exist for the pure joy of singing these songs and the sense of community created when people sing together. They do not rehearse and they do not perform - they just 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.

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[accessed 6/6/2008]. Note: The article quoted is no longer available.

<sup>2</sup> Crawford, Richard, liner notes. *A Land of Pure Delight: William Billings Anthems and Fuging Tunes*. His Majesty's Clerkes, Paul Hillier, cond. Harmonia Mundi, 1992. CD, p.6.