

The Village Quire



West Gallery And Shape Note Music

Introduction

West Gallery and Shape note music seem to have been contemporary developments in musical style. Both styles seem to have come about for much the same reasons. It all began in the early years of the eighteenth century. At this time there was a practice of singing the psalms whereby the minister would sing one line which was then repeated by the congregation but in a much ornamented, drawn out and *ad lib* manner. It seems that each individual was pretty much free to, 'do their own thing'! Can you imagine what that must have sounded like? By the 1720s, according to Larry Gordon, it was felt that American congregations: '... had abandoned all semblance of the original written tunes and ... the anarchic use of ornaments, quavers, and turns of melody was resulting in cacophony'. Rollo Woods reports that in England it was not purely melodic elaboration that was left open to interpretation by the individual, but choice of tempo, too. Typically, the precentor's chosen tempo might be on the slow side, but then some members of the congregation would draw each note of the melody out to extreme length. Psalms, then, were sung within the same time period by all members of the congregation, but there was no requirement for a sense of *ensemble* singing. This was an act of personal devotion in the company of others rather than a musical performance. Participation was the thing; it was not supposed to be listened to.

The church authorities must have stood back and tried to listen, however! This was the period of history known as *The Enlightenment*. Reason, order and clarity were the guiding principles of the day. The enlightened thinkers at the head of the church must have heard a confused mumble of noise from their congregations. Something had to be done. It was this thinking that led to the establishment of singing schools on both sides of the Atlantic in the middle years of the eighteenth Century.

Shape Note

In New England, according to Larry Gordon, schools were established to teach '*regular*' singing rather than '*usual*' singing. Of course, if you have a school to teach '*regular*' singing it will help if everyone is 'singing from the same hymn sheet'. One of the difficulties that trainee musicians complain of from time to time is that of learning to read music. Singing school teachers developed a simplified and readily accessible system of writing music. They came up with a so called 'solmisation' system a little like the famous one we all know from *The Sound of Music*: 'Do: a deer; a female deer. Re: a drop of golden sun' ... and so on. The American system was, however, more economical than this, using only four syllables: fa, sol, la and me. So a major scale would be: fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, me, fa. Now we get to the '*shape*' bit! Each of these syllables was represented by a note head of a different shape. Fa is shown with a **triangular** note head. Sol note heads are **circular**. La notes have square heads. Finally, me notes are distinguished by their **diamond** shaped heads. And there you

have it: **shape notes!** These shapes are still placed on the normal, five line, staff of music, a fact which has led some to question the point of it all! But perhaps ours is not to reason why. They thought it might be useful in the eighteenth century and we are simply left with this fact of musical history.

West Gallery

On our own native soil there is evidence that solmisation systems may have been used in the singing schools, but many manuscript and printed sources exist in standard notation. Singing teachers were sometimes itinerants, moving from place to place and setting up schools in the villages through which they passed. They would teach their material – their own compositions and those of others that they had collected together for the purpose – and would be paid for their trouble by their pupils or possibly from the parish coffers. At the end of their stay they would try to sell the books of printed music that they had been teaching from, to their pupils. Also, they would accept commissions to write tunes for the parishes in which they had been working; hence the number of West Gallery compositions which take place names as their titles.

At this point it might be appropriate to consider why this genre of music is called, 'West Gallery' music? Well, at this point in history much of the floor space of the typical parish church was either rented out or owned by more or less wealthy parishioners. Where, then, to house the choir? The answer was to build a gallery at the tower or west end of the church, hence: 'west' gallery.

West Gallery singing teachers seem often to have had some musical training but were probably best described as semi-professional. They sometimes had trades – publicans, maltsters, tanners and the like. David Davies of Pen y Crug, just to the North West of Builth Wells, Powys, was a farmer who supplemented his income by the teaching of singing. Members of quires, too, received recompense for the role that they played in church life. This recompense may have been in the form of money but also came 'in kind' as food and booze.

To further assist the singers with the tightness of their ensemble and accuracy of their pitching when performing the psalms, English quires very often included instrumentalists. Strings, woodwinds and brass families were all used in one quire or another, from time to time, not to mention curious hybrids such as the ophicleide or the serpent.

In England, it would seem that the ideal was for a group of trained musicians to perform the Psalms for the edification of the rest of the congregation. In '**Under the Greenwood Tree**', Thomas Hardy has the Quire of Mellstock Church most upset when the congregation want to join in:

"Tis the gallery have got to sing, all the world knows," said Mr Penny. "Why, souls, what's the use o' the ancients spending scores of pounds to build galleries if people down in the lowest depths of the church sing like that at a moment's notice?"

Moreover, contemporary reports such as the following from, '*The Gentleman's Magazine*' (February 1741), carry complaints that the difficulty and novelty of the music performed from the galleries precluded congregational involvement:

'On the Abuse of Psalmody in Churches; and Proposals for remedying it'

To Richard Hooker Esq.

Sir,

There is a certain abuse swept, of late years, into the Psalmody of our Churches. We have, on most parishes, a set of men called the Singers; who meet usually, once a week in the Church, to make themselves Masters of the Psalm Tunes, and Anthems too, which they give on Sundays, in the Course of Singing, to the Congregation.

In this we'll say, if you please, there is something laudable; for, it must be granted, that the Singing of Psalms is a divine Institution, and, that the whole Body of the Church ought Vocally, as well as Mentally, to join in it.

But these Men commonly sit together, and order the Singing in their own Way, whereby the Congregation, instead of bearing a Part in the Service, only listen to their more skilful Performance of it. And if they were disposed to do it, they cannot, by Reason of the Newness and Variety of their Tunes; which multiply daily.

Membership of the church quire conferred status upon instrumentalists and singers. The gallery became something of a rival power-base to the pulpit - a sort of East-West confrontation was built into the topography of the Georgian church. The following from Amberley in Sussex is a case in point:

c. 1840. Before the church possessed a harmonium, there was a 'Church Band' and the clarinet was one of the instruments played. John Pennicott was the clarinettist and bandmaster of the church. On one occasion through some misunderstanding with the Vicar, he refused to play and the Vicar asked from the pulpit, 'are you going to play or not?' Pennicott answered for himself and his bandsmen, 'No', to which the parson rejoined, 'Well then, I'm not going to preach' and forthwith came down from the pulpit. Later the band came out with their instruments and gave him 'horn-fair' or 'rough music' to the vicarage ... As they would not play at the service of the church, the Vicar called upon all the inns in the village, and was successful in 'freezing the taps' – that is, the landlords agreed not to serve any of the band with liquor. The bandsmen retorted by white-washing the Vicar's windows from top to bottom of the house during the night!

[Taken from, **John Pennicott: Amberley's 'Famous Musicianer'**, by **Claire Fox** (WGMA magazine, Spring 2007.)]

Perhaps, here, we can start to see some reasons why West Gallery music may have ceased to be part of church services through the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century. In some places,

church bands and quires were replaced by *barrel organs*. These were glorified 'musical boxes' capable of playing a number of tunes to accompany congregational singing. In other places subscriptions were got up to finance the purchase of one of the new American harmoniums. These, too, were used to accompany the singing of the whole congregation. The whole Body of the church *could* now, '... Vocally, as well as Mentally ... join in ...'. Moreover, from the parson's point of view, it was much easier to exercise a firm control over proceedings with only a mechanism to operate or a single musician to command than when faced by a dozen or more tradesmen/musicians who, with their new-found status and, literally, elevated position, began to challenge the established order – albeit within the limits of their own specialist area.

For a period of about one hundred years, then, West Gallery music was not practised at all. All that remained was part books, musical scores in both manuscript and printed form, entries relating to quires and church bands in parish records, mentions in literary sources – Hardy, for instance - and a few crumbling old instruments – bits and bobs gathering dust in forgotten corners. In the late nineteen-eighties, people like Dave Townsend and Gordon Ashman, got hold of some of these old bits and bobs, blew off the dust and decided that they had found something good. Thus began a revival of interest in West Gallery music.