

Reformers and Resisters: Changing Tastes in American Protestant Church Music, 1800-1860

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In 1822 Christiana Tillson moved from Massachusetts to central Illinois. In December of that year she attended church in a log schoolhouse near the frontier town of Hillsboro—about 200 miles west of us today. As she entered, a preacher was leading the congregation in song. He raised the hymn “When I Can Read My Title Clear” by “reading the first two lines of the verse . . . with an indescribable nasal twang” Then the congregation sang the hymn to the tune ‘Old Grimes’ [or “Auld Lang Syne”]. She even attempted to spell out the words of the hymn phonetically to approximate the local accent:

'When I can read my titul clare,
Tue mansheons in the skei,
I'll bid farewell to everie fear,
And wipe my weeping [eye].

Tillson told her grandchildren 50 years later that there were two preachers that morning; one of the preachers was "somewhat logical." The other, a Methodist circuit rider, "would 'get happy,' clap his hands, froth at the mouth; the congregation responding, some groaning, some crying loudly, 'Amen,' some calling "Glory, glory, glory to God!"“ In looking back on these meeting she recalled one impression: “that of intense disgust.”¹

The encounter between this Congregationalist woman from Massachusetts and a frontier congregation—provides a view on the issues surrounding the reform movement in American Protestant church music during the first half of the 19th century. Christiana Tillson probably came from a congregation that had been on the cutting edge of what was new in church music since early colonial days. Her church-music sensibilities had been shaped by so called “scientific” music based on Handel, Haydn, and Mozart. Her view was a result of active reform, firmly established in most churches in urban centers of the Northeast by 1822. We can also observe that part of Tillson’s disgust was over the ardent display of enthusiasm—the shouting, the groaning, the crying out of “Amen!” She would have been used to an atmosphere of solemn dignity where outbursts of enthusiasm would have been horrifying.

Christiana Tillson’s experience with song in that small congregation, the lining out of the hymn sung to a popular tune, the nasal vocal quality, the disturbance of her more refined sensibilities regarding outward emotional displays, all signaled by her “intense disgust,” embodies the major questions being asked early in the 19th century:

What is the purpose of song? What song should we sing? How should we sing that song? Apparent in this little scene is evidence that not everyone answered these questions in the same way.

The skeletal remains of early 19th century musical reform in America are still visible today. They are scattered throughout our hymnals in the form of folk hymns—or in a Billings fuguing tune sung by our church choir. They are present when we sing Lowell Mason’s MISSIONARY HYMN or Thomas Hastings’ TOPLADY—or in reprinted shape-note tunebooks like *The Sacred Harp* and *Southern Harmony*. And shape-note singers dig up a few bones now and again with the occasional reminder of the role Lowell Mason played in removing fugging tunes, distinctive 18th century harmonies, and the shape-note system of note reading from Northern musical culture. There is always a certain passion in this reminder. In fact, I’ve observed that any time died-in-the-wool shape-note singers utter the name “Lowell Mason” they are obliged to spit three times over their left shoulder.

This morning I want to reassemble the bigger pieces of this skeleton. Because of the intervening years, the facts have been polluted and our understanding of the theological and cultural forces at work during that time can only be pieced together from old documents and interpretations by modern scholars. But there is enough evidence to put a fairly recognizable face on musical reform during this period and the cultural that predicted its successes and its failures. It’s a story that is interesting on its own merits, but also warrants being told because it might help explain the dynamics of church music reform that began for us about 30 years ago.

18th Century Beginnings

To understand the efforts of Lowell Mason and the other reformers we must understand the musical forms and practices of 18th century America they were trying to overthrow. The story begins early—about 1720—with the controversy over lining out—what Christiana Tillson heard in that little Hillsboro congregation.

The lining out of metrical psalmody was a well-entrenched practice in Britain by the time Isaac Watts published his *Psalms of David* in 1719. In the preface to this work he expressed concern that the practice was clouding the meaning of texts. He also wished that the singing “might not dwell so long on a single note . . . [as to] put the congregation quite out of breath in singing five or six stanzas.”² The musical effect produced by lining out in the American colonies was notably observed in 1721 by the Massachusetts tunebook compiler Thomas Walters when he said:

“Our tunes are, for want of a standard. . . , [are] left to the mercy of every unskillful throat to chop and alter, twist and change, according to their infinitely diverse, and no less odd, humors and fancies. I have observed in many places, one man is upon this note, while another is a note before him, which produces something so hideous and disorderly, as is beyond expression bad. I myself have twice in one note paused to take breath. . . . [It] sounds in the ears of a good judge, like five hundred different tunes roared out all at the same time.”

Walters published this observation in his tunebook *The Grounds and Rules of Music Explained*, one of the first of many “singing-school” manuals designed to teach congregations to sing by note instead of by rote. The object of this instruction was to reestablish the standard tunes that had become unrecognizable or had actually merged

with similar tunes because of the practice of embellishment and the “every-man-for-himself” approach to congregational singing. That some congregations held on to lining out is no surprise given how we tend to sacralize long-standing practices. But many congregations accepted the challenge of reform, and by the 1760s singing schools were well established throughout the colonies and lining out was the choice of only a few resisters.

As the music-reading proficiency of many singers increased so did the desire of the more proficient singers to establish choirs. As more and more churches acquiesced to choral singing in Sunday services, choirs demanded more complex anthems. Fuging tunes and anthems learned in singing school answered the immediate call. Church musicians depended on English compositions at first; but in 1770 William Billings published his first tunebook *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, introducing a distinctively American take on the English model. Of his own fuging tunes Billings said that:

“It is well known there is more variety in one piece of fuging music, than in twenty pieces of plain song. While each part is straining for mastery, and sweetly contending for victory, the audience are most luxuriously entertained, and exceedingly delighted. . . . Now the solemn bass demands their attention, now the manly tenor, now the lofty counter, now the volatile treble – now here, now there, now here again. O enchanting! O ecstatic! Rush on, ye sons of harmony.”

William Billings and other American composers like Daniel Read and Jeremiah Ingalls made their primary living at something other than being a musician. We know about these so-called Yankee Tunesmiths because of the numerous tunebooks they published. But in the background, away from the established world of publishing and the more prominent churches in New England, Christians were singing religious verse to popular ballad tunes, a practice that was prevalent in England as early as the mid-16th century when it was criticized by the hymnwriter George Wither. He was concerned that “the name of our blessed Saviour [is] invocated and sung to those roguish tunes, which have formerly served for profane jiggs.”³

Cotton Mather, minister at Boston’s Old North Church, suggested that since the people were so fond of ballad singing, it could be put to good use as a means of religious instruction. He was concerned that the minds and manners of many people had been “corrupted by the foolish airs and ballads which the Hawkers and Peddlers carry into all parts of the country.” His solution was to “procure poeticall composures full of Piety, and such as may have a tendency to cause Truth and Goodness to be published and scattered into all corners of the land.”⁴ Mather didn’t have to look far for “composures full of Piety.” You can imagine a woman working in her garden or a man plowing in the field singing a metrical Psalm to a “ballad tune.” Certainly the singing of “When I Can Read My Title Clear” to the popular tune “Old Grimes” that Christiana Tillson encountered in that little church in Hillsboro came from these roots.

The result of this spontaneous (or sometimes purposeful) pairing of religious text with a folk melody was the accumulation of a large body of folk hymns, which remained an oral tradition until they began to be published in the first decade of the 19th century.

So to listen in on Protestant church music in New England by the close of the Revolutionary War, we would hear varying sounds: some congregations have hung on tenaciously to the practice of lining out psalms. In rural areas or outside the church the practice of singing Psalms and hymns to ballad tunes was thriving. Most urban churches,

however, had converted from the Old Way (or lining out) to Regular Singing by learning to read and sing the correct notes of the Psalm tunes in singing school. In these churches, choirs dominated, singing anthems, fuguig tunes and plain tunes by an increasing number American composers. Harmonies were greatly influenced by close attention to the melodic quality of each part rather than to the resulting chord progression. Congregational participation had diminished although singing along with the choir was common.⁵ By the reports of the critics vocal tone was very harsh and nasal.

Conversion of Musical Taste

Within ten years of the signing of the Peace of Paris 1783 that officially ended hostilities between Britain and America, Andrew Law, a tunebook compiler and printer from Cheshire, Connecticut, set in motion what reformers hoped would be a conversion of musical taste in the fledgling country. In his tunebook *The Musical Primer* he laid out the complaints that would set the agenda followed by all early-19th century reformers including the most well-known reformers Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings. Fundamental to the problem in Law's thinking was bad singing, which he blamed for the deficiencies of American composers. He said that until singing can be "rendered smooth, persuasive, and melting," and when all voices are "joined together. . .in the most perfect tune," only then would it be possible to "distinguish between compositions of genuine merit."⁶ And in following this argument he suggests that most American composition was "faulty" and thus unacceptable for corporate worship. (I quote)

Hence the man of piety and principle, of taste and discernment in music, and hence, indeed, all, who entertain a sense of decency and decorum in devotion, are oftentimes offended with that lifeless and insipid, of that frivolous and frolicksome succession and combinations of sounds, so frequently introduced into churches, where all should be serious, animated, and devout.⁷

Beginning in 1794 Andrew Law ignored compositions by American composers and printed only selected British tunes. He linked the music of Handel and Madan and others with proper religious sentiments. We see here the beginnings of a tendency toward elitism—one that was fundamental to reform; to elevate European musical forms and practice over their American counterparts.⁸

Following Andrew Law, reformers throughout the first half of the 19th century considered the works of 18th -century American composers and their less refined English predecessors to be crude, uncultivated, inferior, and in bad taste. In his critique of William Billings Lowell Mason said that Billings "professes to be governed by no laws but those of his own fancy, and he rejects all those rules to which good taste and experience had led the best composers."—Furthermore, Mason suggested that the popular composers who followed Billings, like Lewis Edson and Justin Morgan produced "the most silly and contemptible trash imaginable in the form of psalm tunes, preposterous and profane" and that this music "overspread the land like the locusts of Egypt."⁹

The reformers' objection to tunes usually related to what Lowell Mason called "an easy and popular (though often low and vulgar) flow of melody for Tenor voices"¹⁰ that was not conducive to reverence in church. And they were highly critical of using folk tunes and popular tunes, known then as "ballad tunes," first fitted to secular texts. They

felt that popular tunes would conjure up “profane associations” in the mind of the singer that would detract from the dignity of the sacred text.

But while certain tunes were under attack, the reformers were especially critical of the harmonies associated with the old songs. These harmonies were derived from a linear approach that gave equal importance to each part and contained bald parallelisms, crossing parts, clashing intervals, and what looked to the critics like odd chord progressions. The reformers considered the popular fuguing-tune structure to be merely entertainment and musically amateurish. In their view fuguing tunes “tortur[ed] every note in the octave” so that they could not “affect the heart, nor inform the understanding.”¹¹ In the minds of the reformers this music was of a “secular character, . . . too often feeble, without dignity, . . . without religious associations, and . . . quite unable to awaken or sustain a spirit of worship.”¹² Instead, the reformers favored the European model, the thorough-bass structure that prevailed in the music of Mozart, Haydn, and Handel, which they hailed as “refined” and “scientific.”

Resisters

The reformers’ vociferous criticism and rejection of the homegrown American music had an enormous influence in the coastal urban centers, especially in the Northeast. Reform-minded compilers flooded the Northern market with new tunebooks containing “the most approved tunes.” But although many churches in coastal urban areas embraced musical reform, homegrown American music remained popular in the rural Northeast, especially among those who had sung the old music in their youth, and in the Upland South, and here in the West in spite of the reform movement.

Even as the call for reform was heating up, John Wyeth published one of the early shape-note tunebooks, *The Repository of Sacred Music* which contained the so called “inferior” music of the Yankee Tunesmiths and *The Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second* which was one of the first tunebooks to contain folk-related hymn tunes. Both of these tunebooks were published in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and sold well in places like Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York.

Many Northern compilers actively resisted reform by publishing tunebooks containing the familiar versions of the old tunes and used the prefaces of those books to speak out. *The American Vocalist* published in Boston in 1849 is a prime example. Compiler D. H. Mansfield comments on the tastes and practices of the average person:

In every part of the United States, even where new music is sung in the public congregation because it is fashionable, let any one mingle with the devout worshippers of God in their social meetings, and he will hear not the scientific gingling [and older spelling of jingling] of imported discord, but the simple harmony of old Turner, Northfield, the Union Hymn, or something that moves the hearts of good men, if it does not tickle the fastidious fancy of infidels.¹³

If Mansfield is to be believed, the people whose churches adopted the music of the reformers, dutifully sang the new tunes in church on Sunday morning, and sang the old songs at other gatherings.

In another clever statement Mansfield turns the rhetoric of reform on its head when he asks Who’s making the rules anyway? He says:

If it is said that the rules of modern composition are frequently violated by the old composers, we will only say that old rules are as often violated by the new [rules] . . . Every one knows how much old tunes have suffered by the modern improvements imposed upon them.¹⁴

Southerners added their brand of resistance by embracing the early shape-note books published first in the North, which contained all the music reformers shunned. They further immortalized this repertoire by reprinting it in popular Southern shape-note tunebooks. And in another apparently subversive act Southern tunebook compilers “Southernized” the harmonies of many tunes introduced by the Northern reformers. They rewrote them to match the distinctive harmonies found of 18th-century American compositions.

Christiana Tillson’s encounter in 1822, with what must have seemed to her as a backward approach to church music, is significant. It gives us a clue that what had spread like wild fire among those wanting to jump on the bandwagon of reform, had not affected this western congregation. The fact that they practiced lining out is even more interesting showing that this group of believers had ignored not only the current wave of reform, but the wave of reform decrying lining out almost a hundred years earlier.

By the middle of the 19th century the reformers of Protestant church music had made some significant headway in changing the nature of sacred song in the Northeast, but the goals of reform, stated so hopefully in the first decades of the century had still not been met. The enormous popularity of many of the old tunes presented a dilemma. A statement in the preface to Mason’s *The Sabbath Hymn and Tune Book* of 1859 explains this dilemma and is typical of statements in other tunebooks published by the reformers. He says that

We have, of course, felt obliged sometimes to sacrifice our own taste to what has appeared to be a public demand, and to admit tunes [into our tunebooks] which we regard as having structural defects as tunes for Congregational Singing.¹⁵

Nathaniel Gould, an advocate of reform, reported in 1853 that the state of congregational singing had not improved and that choirs were smaller in spite of the efforts of reformers.¹⁶ Failure is also betrayed in the preface of Lowell Mason’s *The National Psalmist*, 1848. The rather lengthy preface outlines everything that was wrong with American church music from the colonial era up to the time of publication. We can clearly see his frustration that not everyone, even in the Northeast, dutifully acquiesced to the reformers’ goals of eradicating “vulgar” music and improving the quality of congregational singing.

A Culture of Reform

A snapshot of the state of things at mid century, with its Northern reactionaries and the thriving of William Billings and Daniel Read and “Wondrous Love” and “Garden Hymn” in the Upland South and West, suggests a rather complicated story—that the “Better Music Boys,” as George Pullen Jackson called them, were not as successful as we might have glibly believed. Various controlling cultural and theological issues kept reform from having a free ride.

If we take a broad look at the culture in which this early 19th century reform took place, we begin to see the reason why some accepted reform, and the mindset of the

resisters. First we must understand that Andrew Law, Lowell Mason, and Thomas Hastings were not acting alone. They were actors in a larger drama of reform that took place between the Revolution and the Civil War. The circumstances that bred musical reform and insured its success in certain segments of the population grew out of a larger culture of reform. That reform was so popular and pervasive during this period is heard in the remarks of Ralph Waldo Emerson speaking before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association in Boston, 1841. He suggests that never before had the doctrine of reform had such a broad scope. He points out that even in the reformations involving Lutherans, Jesuits, Quakers, Knox, or Wesley, some things were kept intact—"be it church or state, literature or history, the dinner table, or coined money." But now everyone and everything "hear[s] the trumpet, and must rush to judgment—Christianity, the laws, commerce, schools, the farm, the laboratory—and [every] kingdom, town, statute, rite, calling, man, or woman . . . is threatened by the new spirit. . . . The demon of reform has a secret door into the heart of every lawmaker, of every inhabitant, of every city."¹⁷

Perhaps the most important and far-reaching influence on reformers and those who accepted reform was the widespread belief that the United States would lead the world toward the millennial kingdom. This belief, based on the thousand-year reign of Christ predicted in the book of Revelation, was inspired by the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and a faith in reason spawned by the Enlightenment. During the end of the 18th and first decades of the 19th centuries theologians of every stripe believed and acted upon this interpretation of Scripture. Cultural historian Ronald Walters says that clergymen conveyed the message that human intervention could play a part in ushering in God's Kingdom. People did not have to wait for the new day; they could hasten it by working to improve society. But to do this Calvinist theologians had to soften a view held by early American Congregationalist and Presbyterians—that humans were sinful and could do nothing of their own free will to please God. Influenced by Enlightenment thought and the "free will" doctrine of the Methodists, even late 17th century Presbyterians and Congregationalists had been finding ways to alter their theology without abandoning every tenant of Calvinism.¹⁸

Bred in New England, the millennialist vision "contributed to a spirit of optimism, a sensitivity to human suffering, and boundless faith in humanity's capacity to improve social institutions."¹⁹ Furthermore, triumphs in science and technology contributed to a widespread faith in the capacity of human beings to improve society through the use of reason. To fulfill this dream movements were launched to give equal rights to women, set up hospitals for the mentally ill, educate the blind and deaf, and abolish slavery. Model experimental communities, public schools, Sunday schools, new kinds of orphanages, and prisons were established. With improved character in mind reformers worked to end prostitution, curb drinking, and spread the Christian gospel through revival.²⁰

Lowell Mason's full-fledged baptism into millennialism came when he was 26 years old. With a successful reform-minded tunebook under his belt, *The Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection of Church Music* of 1822, Mason, then a banker in Savannah, Georgia, was recruited by Lyman Beecher to be music director at Hanover and Bowdoin Street Churches in Boston. As the most well known preacher of his day, Beecher was a leading exponent of New-England based millennialism and was influential in forming lecture, library, temperance, elocution, and debating societies to "improve the

moral and intellectual condition of the city.” Beecher’s *Autobiography* praises Lowell Mason for his work on the “Handel and Haydn Collection” and makes this telling assertion: “[Beecher’s] full belief that the millennium was coming, that it was at hand, that the Church was just about to march with waving banners to final and universal dominion, *imparted to music*, as it had to theology— [let me repeat] *imparted to music, as it had to theology*, an entirely new spirit.”²¹ Here Beecher (like Luther, perhaps) puts music next to theology; making theology and music equal partners in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

From this high platform, then, Lowell Mason launched his campaign against the “vulgar and insipid” music of colonial America—music not fit for the coming kingdom. In his writings we hear the rhetoric of millennialist thought; and we hear also the rhetoric of reform with its appeal to reason and to science. In the context of millennial fever it is not hard to understand why changes in musical taste spread so quickly through the urban centers of New England and along the eastern coast. Edification through “chaste and dignified” music, and that from what was seen as the more “highly developed” musical practices of Europe’s great composers, exemplified the spirit of the day for those who saw themselves as progressive.

Millennialist thought mixed with other cultural mindsets also resulted in a certain elitism. New Englanders had adopted a high view of themselves in relationship to the rest of the country. They tended to see it as their mission to spread their point of view and values to the nation.²² From the pinnacle of elitism Thomas Hastings took the view that the development of musical taste was progressive—it improved with education—and in his *Dissertation on Musical Taste* of 1822 referred to all those outside the ken of true taste as the “uninformed.” Quite assuredly he said that “taste. . .will progress, and the party in favour of it must sooner or later prevail.”²³ He was persistent and only somewhat patronizing in his call for reform. Lowell Mason on the other hand spoke passionately and acerbically to those who did not conform to what he called “the universally acknowledged facts of musical science”²⁴ Think back to the words Christiana Tillson used to describe her experience in that Hillsboro congregation. Her words, summed up in her “intense disgust,” reflect the elitist tendencies of Northeasterners at this time.

Reasons for Resistance

If we can account for the origins and acceptance of reform in the context of Northern culture, we can also account for the failures of early 19th century musical reform by looking at the larger American culture— apparently not all Americans were cut from the same mold. Regional sensibilities and theological points of view were moderating factors, as was a rising egalitarian spirit that was willing to take or leave elitist proclamations.

The music of the Yankee Tunesmiths along with folk hymnody and shape-note notation, all maligned by the reformers, continued to live a good life in the South, away from the strong influence of Northern reformers—for most reformers lived north of the Mason-Dixon line. It is interesting to note that Southern tunebook compilers didn’t rail against reform as did Northern resisters. Instead they simply co-opted tunes of the reformers that they liked—the new along with the old. Take this line from the preface to William Walker’s *Southern Harmony*:

Those that are partial to ancient music [Billings, et. al.], will here find some good old acquaintances which will cause them to remember the scenes of life that are past and gone; while youthful companions, who are more fond of modern music [Mason, et. al.], I hope will find a sufficient number of new tunes to satisfy them, [and here is the most important part] as I have spared no pains in trying to select such tunes as would meet the wishes of the public.²⁵

Walker published several tunes of the reformers such as Mason's MISSIONARY HYMN and ANTIOCH, adjusting the harmony as he saw fit, with no comment other than that he thought a segment of the public might like them.

While the theology of millennialism was the main driver among Northern reform movements, some groups of evangelicals were particularly insulated from all reform—including musical reform—by virtue of their theology. Premillennialist, for example, like New England Baptists who followed William Miller held that the world was in a downward spiral, that the millennium would come only after Christ raptured the church, and that they should simply wait for the judgment. No millennial fever there. And the lining out of hymns practiced by the little congregation in Hillsboro that Christiana Tillson encountered was solidly grounded in a Calvinistic theology that emphasizes the meaning of the spoken word as much as or more than it does purely musical qualities.

Sometimes political persuasions mixed quite well with theological points of view. Jacksonian politics along with “free-will” theology empowered the individual giving many citizens a choice—and many chose not to conform—or to pick and choose what they liked from the old and the new music. The “free will” doctrine put forth by the popular evangelist Charles Finney and the Methodists suggested that “everyone, not just professors and preachers could understand what was important to know, a doctrine as egalitarian as anything put forth by Jacksonian politicians.²⁶ This way of thinking predominated here on the western frontier.

And we can expect, of course, that some were simply acting on what Hastings had referred to as “the dread of innovation”²⁷—that universal resistance to change.

Two Views of Revival

One of the best ways to understand the issues of musical reform from the point of view of both the reformers and the resisters is to view them in the context of revivalism—for revivalism was the most pervasive manifestations of reform during this period. Belief about the nature and methods of revival predicted what music would be sung.

In sticking closer to Calvinistic doctrine Old School Presbyterians and Congregationalists based in New England believed that revival came only by God's sovereignty and through prayer. Asahel Nettleton's approach, for example, was to spend several weeks in a community at the invitation of local pastors, preaching low-keyed but pointed sermons about the need for conversion. The aim was to present the gospel to those *called to respond*—regeneration of the soul was God's doing. Preachers who espoused this approach greatly discouraged enthusiasm in meetings. These mostly Eastern revivals emphasized calm assent to the gospel—and song was to be dignified, solidly Scriptural, and used to support the clear sermon.

On the other hand Methodists and New School Presbyterians including Charles Finney embraced the doctrine of “free will” that put the choice of conversion into the

hands of the sinner. Revival could happen anywhere, at any time, and was based on the skill of the preacher to convince sinners of their need. In revivals of this type, referred to at the time as “Western revivals,” outward manifestations of enthusiasm played a vital role. The preaching was theatrical, people shouted responses to the sermon, sometimes people shook or fell on the ground, and song was calculated to draw out an emotional response.

In 1831 Joshua Leavitt published *The Christian Lyre*—a popular hymnal designed to meet the needs of these Western-style revivals. Leavitt thought that revivals required music that was “somewhat lighter and more songlike . . . with rippling rhythms and sometimes ‘chorusses;’” and many agreed. Effectiveness was more important to him than correctness of taste. His approach to gathering music and texts flew in the face of reform: He asked the public to send him their favorites. What people sent were campmeeting spirituals, folk hymns, and popular street songs set to sacred texts—exactly what Mason and Hastings were condemning. The collection contained much contrafacta including the tune to “The Last Rose of Summer” which Leavitt called ST. DENIS, and “Home, Sweet Home,” a popular song only seven years old at the time. Folk hymns included “Saw Ye My Savior,” an adaptation of the folk song “Saw Ye My Johnny” and “Garden Hymn” which would have been known to Hastings and Mason as a variation of “Nancy Dawson” but had first appeared as a British dance tune titled “Piss upon the Grass.”²⁸

Also in 1831 Mason and Hastings published *Spiritual Songs for Social Worship* to counter the spread of songs “connected with profane associations” that were available in *The Christian Lyre*. In the preface to *Spiritual Songs* Hastings and Mason state that “the public have been extensively called upon, in these enlightened days of reform, to recognize the current love song, the vulgar melodies of the street, of the midnight reveler, of the circus, and the bar room. . . in special seasons of revival!” With a slight tone of condescension Hastings and Mason did, however, allow that these objectionable tunes might be sung with some benefit by new converts who were “ignorant of the true principles of devotional music,” but they should never be published.²⁹

Spiritual Songs for Social Worship contained songs whose “moral value” had been guaranteed by their European origins. Their “correctness” and “scientific” precision had been determined by the arbiters of good taste. They suited a more dignified revival according to expert opinion. *The Christian Lyre* on the other hand contained songs suggested and approved by the people and were known to be effective in Western-style revivals where enthusiasm was allowed and encouraged. This compendium of favorite songs exemplified the frontier spirit with its Jacksonian sensibilities mixed with the doctrine of “free will.” This tendency allowed the needs of revival to join with “secular currents.”³⁰ Both *The Christian Lyre* and *Spiritual Song for Social Worship* sold well and went into several editions.

It appears that George Pullen Jackson was right when he observed that in the North, with its belief in improvement, compilers gave the public “what they should sing.” But in the South, compilers encouraged singers “to sing what they liked.”³¹ While Jackson’s view was correct as far as it went, it fell a bit short. I would observe that those who sang what they liked were everywhere—including New England—not just the South. In 1822, at the hopeful height of musical reform, Thomas Hastings astutely recognized that “men will never be controlled in affairs of taste.”³² And the various levels and forms of resistance bear this out.

Learning from History

Perhaps you heard the strains of our present struggles echoed in the struggles of early 19th century American Christians. If time allowed, we could discuss the cultural norms and theological points of view that have given rise to the changes in church music we've experienced over the past 30 years. We know that painful arguments arise in times of major reform and the present situation is no exception. Reformers, their mission clear and their motives noble, often level the path before them by speaking condescendingly about the older methods they wish to replace. They often characterize resisters as old-fashioned or uninformed at best, and at worst, accuse them of creating a roadblock to enlightenment. For their part those who question the new approach strike back with arguments that range from reasoned to purely vitriolic. It is painful. Some are left behind.

Our 19th century counterparts experienced the same thing. We hear disaffection in the voice of D. H. Mansfield when he says the songs that “made the eyes of the congregation sparkle” or weep have been replaced by music that suits the “fastidious fancy of infidels.” We hear sadness in the voice of Amos Sutton Hayden who said in 1848 that the removal of the old songs from corporate worship “compels all the Christians in the assembly to be silent, for the inspiration is taken from their lips.”³³ From the side of reform we hear passion in the “intense disgust” of Christiana Tillson as she observed the singing practices in that Hillsboro schoolhouse. We hear fervor in the voice of Lowell Mason as he calls the music that was the object of the reformer's scorn “insipid, frivolous, vulgar, and profane.” We hear assurance in the assertion that the music of reform contained “the most art with the least ostentation; one which accords with the solemnities of religious worship, and tends to inspire feelings of awe, reverence, tenderness and devotion.”³⁴

Is there something to be learned from our early 19th century brothers and sisters in Christ and their battle over reform? I would give a qualified “yes.” Unfortunately we are no different than those who struggled 200 years ago. We are sincere in our efforts. We have good reasons, we believe, for supporting one side or the other. Whatever wisdom we might gain and apply from an earlier period of reform is clouded by our proximity to the current issues. Perhaps some researcher two hundred years hence will be able to judge more clearly the outcome of current reform.

But if pressed, I would say that reform is never innocuous. The “demon of reform,” as Emerson called reform fever, will change everything. We cannot escape the fact that what we sing and how we sing it will change us. And there is plenty of evidence that our current musical reform has greatly changed some branches of the church. If I were to give advice that could possibly moderate the effects of reform, I would say to reformers: be careful that your insistence on a new musical style doesn't leave people in the dust, doesn't end up removing something that is good even if it is old. Study the old. Know why it was established in the first place. Consider the potential effects of your insistence on change. Does it truly match your theology or is it simply encouraged by cultural norms that as Christians we might be better off fighting. And to the resisters I would say: know why you hang on to the old tunes, their history, why they were established in the first place. Is there enough reason to fight for them?

Perhaps we are destined to repeat the challenges of reform in regular cycles—for there is hardly an American Christian, past or present, who has not witnessed musical reform at some time in their lives. May God give us grace and wisdom as we struggle with the ongoing questions—the questions that always lie at the heart of musical reform in the church: What is the purpose of song in corporate worship? What song best fits that purpose? and How should we sing that song?

¹ The story of Chistiana Tillson is freely adapted from Peter Ellertsen, "American Folk Hymnody in Illinois, 1800-1850." Conference on Illinois History, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Springfield, October 14, 2000, p. 1. Ellertsen took Tillson quotes from John W. Allen. *Legends and Lore of Southern Illinois*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963, pp. 78-80. Ellertsen's article can be found at <http://www.sci.edu/classes/ellertsen/hymn102400.html>

² Watts Complete Works

³ Christ-Janer, Hughes, and Smith, *American Hymns Old and New*, Vol I. Columbia University Press, 1985

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Lowell Mason complains of this in the preface to *The National Psalmist*.

⁶ Andrew Law, *The Musical Primer* as quoted in Crawford *American Musical Life: A History*.....p 128.

⁷ Andrew Law, *The Musical Primer* as quoted in Crawford *American Musical Life: A History*.....p 128, 129.

⁸ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 108

⁹ Lowell Mason & George Webb, *The National Psalmist* (Boston: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1848), preface. (A transcription of the entire preface can be seen at <http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar>)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ From a speech by John Hubbard as quoted by Irving Lowens, *Wyeth's Repository of Sacred Music* (Da Capo Press, New York, 1974), p. xi.

¹² Mason & Webb, *The National Psalmist*, preface.

¹³ D. H. Mansfield, *The American Vocalist* (Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1849), preface. (A transcription of the entire preface can be seen at <http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar>)

¹⁴ Mansfield, *The American Vocalist*, preface.

¹⁵ Lowell Mason, *The Sabbath Hymn and Tune Book* (New York: Mason Brother, 1864), preface. (A transcription of the entire preface can be seen at <http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar>)

¹⁶ Nathaniel Gould, *Church Music in America* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), pp. 72-73, (Reprint of the 1853 edition.) p. 237.

¹⁷ Man The Reformer Written in 1841 by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) This version originally published in 2005 by Infomotions, Inc. This document is distributed under the GNU Public License. (A Lecture read before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association, Boston, January 25, 1841) <http://www.infomotions.com/alex2/authors/emerson-ralph/emerson-man-733/>

¹⁸ Ronald G. Walker, *American Reformers: 1815-1860*. (revised ed.) New York: Hill and Wang, 1997, pp. 26, 27.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. xiii.

²¹ Beecher *Autobiography*

²² Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 18, 19.

²³ Thomas Hastings, *Dissertation on Musical Taste*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1974, p. 191.

²⁴ Mason, *The National Psalmist*, see the note appended to the tune MAJESTY, p. 296

²⁵ William Walker, *Southern Harmony, And Musical Companion* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller) 1835, Preface to the Former Edition.

²⁶ Ronald G. Walker, *American Reformers: 1815-1860*. (revised ed.) New York: Hill and Wang, 1997, p. 29.

²⁷ Thomas Hastings, *Dissertation on Musical Taste* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), p202. (Reprint of the 1822 edition)

²⁸ James C. Downey, "Joshua Leavitt's *The Christian Lyre* and the Beginning of the Popular Tradition in American Religious Song," *Latin American Music Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Autumn – Winter, 1986), pp. 154-155. [The origin of the tune for "The Garden Hymn" is found in David G. Klocko, "Jeremiah Ingalls' *The Christian Harmony: or, Songster's Companion* (1805)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1978.)]

²⁹ Thomas Hastings and Lowell Mason, *Spiritual Songs for Social Worship* (Utica: Gardiner Tracy, 3rd ed., 1835), preface.

³⁰ Ronald G. Walker, *American Reformers: 1815-1860*. (revised ed.) New York: Hill and Wang, 1997, p. 29.

³¹ Jackson in Crawford p. 159

³² Thomas Hastings, *Dissertation on Musical Taste*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1974, p. 191.

³³ Amos Sutton Hayden. *The Sacred Melodeon* (Philadelphia: T. K. Collins, Jr., 1848), p. 3.

³⁴ Quote from "Rev. Mr. Havergal" which appeared in Lowell Mason & George Webb, *The National Psalmist* (Boston: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1848), preface.