

72. Invocation

(The Continental Harmony, 1794)

William Billings
(1746-1800)
arr. William Melton

Billings, William

(born 7 October 1746 in Boston; died 26 September 1800 in Boston)

A tanner by trade, Billings was essentially self-taught in composition. A powerful singing voice and a knack for teaching put him in the forefront of the choral world of Boston. Lacking formal technical training, Billings imbued his hymns, anthems and 'fuging tunes' with a primitive, muscular style of his own making. He was a practical progressive, introducing the pitch pipe to rehearsals and adding cello to strengthen the bass line. A partisan of independence during the Revolutionary War, his acquaintances included Samuel Adams and Paul Revere. Though the best known American composer of his time, Billings' last years were dominated by financial struggle, and he was buried in a pauper's grave.

According to Billings' chronicler Karl Kroeger the composer managed to produce 'over 340 compositions, almost exclusively sacred choral pieces for four-part unaccompanied chorus'. Six collections of his music were published beginning with *The New England Psalm Singer* of 1770 (the first printed collection of the work of a particular American composer, with a frontispiece engraved by Paul Revere). Billings' work in fostering concerts in New England is discernable in the text of 'Invocation' (from his last collection, *The Continental Harmony, 1794*), which reads,

Majestic God our muse inspire,
And fill us with seraphic fire,
Augment our swells, our tones refine,
Performance ours, the glory thine.

The emphatic return of the last two lines in 6/4 metre has meaning on both sacred and secular planes: to elevate performance beyond the self is an aspiration that musicians all share.

Text by William Melton