

09. Shiloh

("Methinks I see an heav'nly host"; 1786)

William Billings
(1746-1800)
arr. William Melton

Billings, William

(born October 7, 1746 in Boston; died September 26, 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 worked tirelessly to foster the music of others. His 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 compilation of the work of a particular American composer, with a frontispiece engraved by Paul Revere).

"Shiloh" was first published in Boston in 1786 as part of the *Suffolk Harmony*. The ancient Hebrew title, in addition to being the name of a city in Samaria, also refers to "he that is to be sent," i.e. the Messiah. The latter is the meaning used in Billings' "Shiloh," the opening of which reads,

Methinks I see an heavenly Host
Of angels on the wing;
Methinks I hear their cheerful notes,
So merrily they sing.

Here the *alle breve* meter changes into a broad 6/4 to reveal the reason for the angels' joy:

Let all your fears be banished hence,
Glad tidings I proclaim;
For there is a Savior born today
And Jesus is his name.

Text by William Melton