Notes on the program

American Angels is the diary of our journey to the roots of Anglo-American spiritual vocal music. It includes songs of redemption and glory from the time of the American Revolution to the present day: eighteenth-century psalm settings and fuging tunes from rural New England, nineteenth-century folk hymns and camp revival songs from the rural South, and gospel songs originating in Northeastern cities and adopted in the late nineteenth century by rural Southerners. Each of these musical styles has played its own part in an interweaving of oral and written traditions, in which favorite older tunes have survived and flourished from one generation to the next. We love the fact that these tunes have been treasured by so many others before us. They have been printed again and again in the tunebooks, and imprinted on the memories of generation after generation of singers, who continue to sing them at singing conventions, in worship services, and in many other settings.

The story of the rural American sacred music featured in American Angels opens with the attempts of certain eighteenth-century colonists to "improve" upon the lining out of psalms. In this practice - the main musical worship practice in the Colonies at the time -- a deacon read out a line of text, the congregation responded by singing it, the deacon read out another line of text, and so on. How did those in favor of replacing the "old way of singing" with "regular singing" accomplish their goal? With the introduction of the singing school, where students practiced singing the octave scale with European solmization syllables, fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa, and learned to sing music composed in three and four parts. The singing school acted as a primary means of musical education and of disseminating music in New England during the eighteenth century.

The music taught in the earliest singing schools and published in the first colonial American tunebooks was imported from England. But by the late eighteenth century, New England tunesmiths -- singing school masters who had attended the singing schools, themselves -- had started to make their own contributions. Many of them compiled their own tunebooks, which they sold to singing school students in each town they visited. They were at first greatly influenced by the English composers of their day, but soon the sound of their compositions began to reflect their rural American origins. Most frequently taking their texts from the English poet Isaac Watts, the New Englanders wrote pieces intended both for worship and for artistic expression. They favored among other styles four-part homophonic settings of psalms, such as POLAND and AMANDA, and fuging tunes featuring both homophonic and imitative sections, such as BLOOMING VALE. In both forms, the tenor line holds the tune, but the other three voices carry equally strong, independent, melodies.

By the early nineteenth century, the heyday of the New England tunesmiths had ended. But singing schools had already begun to spread to the rural South, where they thrived for well over a century. Singing school masters now published tunebooks containing a new "patented" notation using four different shapes for noteheads (triangle for fa, circle for sol, rectangle for la, and diamond for mi), intended to help students using the "fa-sol-la" syllables to learn to read music more quickly and easily.

The compilers of the Southern four-shape tunebooks acted as collectors as well as composers. They included in each new publication many favorite psalm settings and fuging tunes by eighteenth-century New Englanders. Some of their own musical additions to the tunebooks document the music sung at the camp meetings, huge evangelical religious gatherings that flourished during the first half of the nineteenth century. Singing played an essential role at these revival meetings, encouraging and celebrating the conversion of souls and helping to bring about a feeling of community among the thousands of people who attended them.

The simpler musical forms contributed by the Southern tunebook compilers include narrative religious ballads, strophic folk hymns, such as NEW BRITAIN and WONDROUS LOVE, and camp revival songs intended for large group participation, such as JEWETT and MORNING TRUMPET, characterized by short verses

alternating with choruses, and by their exclamations of, "Shout, O glory!" Their texts come from Charles Wesley and other eighteenth-century English poets, and from newer American authors whose works could be found in pocket-sized text-only hymnals such as *Mercer's Cluster*. Among their most popular themes: conversion and grace, the difficulty of life on earth, and especially looking forward to the hereafter. The tunebook compilers wrote some of the tunes for these songs themselves, but they drew many others from oral tradition. Much influenced by their modal tenor-line tunes, the three- and four-part harmonizations of the folk hymns and revival songs sound hauntingly open and hollow.

After the invention of a new system of seven-shape notation in the 1840's, singing school masters began to instruct their students to read music using the more familiar solmization syllables: do-re-me-fa-sol-la-si-do. The first seven-shape tunebooks resembled their four-shape counterparts in shape and content, although they favored camp revival songs over earlier styles. These seven-shape books also contained some of the new gospel songs, often similar to the camp revival songs in their structure of verse alternating with chorus, but identifiable by their simple, melody-driven European harmonies and their optimistic or pleading texts.

The composers of SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER, ANGEL BAND, and other gospel songs came from Northeastern cities and had studied European musical style and tradition. They may have actually felt a certain disdain for shape note singing schools and the music contained in the shape note tunebooks. At their singing schools, they taught their students to sing from round notes, rather than shape notes, and they published hundreds of songs in Sabbath School and gospel song collections printed in round notes in the mid to late nineteenth century. Despite their best intentions, the simpler and more folk-like of their compositions soon appeared in the Southern seven-shape tunebooks.

Many of the gospel songs originating in the urban Northeast and adopted by Southern tunebook compilers went on to become favorites in the twentieth century. Many well-known artists -- Ralph Stanley, the Statler Brothers, and Emmylou Harris, to name only a few -- have featured them on recordings in a wide variety of styles, among them hillbilly, bluegrass, country, and Southern gospel. Some gospel songs can also be found in several seven-shape tunebooks that are still in use. And certain Primitive Baptist congregations sing from seven-shape hymnals that even now retain a large proportion of eighteenth-century New England tunes, and nineteenth-century folk hymns, camp revival songs, and gospel songs.

Several four-shape tunebooks have also remained in continuous use since the early nineteenth century. *The Sacred Harp*, the most popular of these, first appeared in 1844, and is still used at traditional "sings", where participants continue the singing school practice of singing the tunes through with the fa-sol-la syllables before moving on to sing the text. The latest revision of *The Sacred Harp* preserves many of the tunes included in the 1844 edition, but also contains quite recent shape note tunes composed in the older styles, such as the religious ballad WAYFARING STRANGER.

Since their establishment in the eighteenth century, thousands of people have attended the singing schools, and many still sing the three- and four-part fuging tunes, psalm tunes, folk hymns, and camp revival songs. Others instead -- or in addition -- continue in the oldest tradition of singing from text-only hymnals. They carry in their memories many of the same tunes that were adapted from oral tradition and harmonized in parts by the nineteenth-century Southern tunebook compilers. At home or at social gatherings, the hymns may be sung by a solo voice or by a small group, sometimes with improvised added lines influenced by the open harmonies found in the old tunebooks. The style of hymn singing at worship services varies from congregation to congregation, but practices include congregational singing of tunes and even the lining out decried by the eighteenth-century colonists who argued for "regular singing" almost 300 years ago.

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