

WINCHESTER SINGS

By Ellen Knight¹

SINGING SCHOOLS, THE FIRST CHURCH CHOIR & INSTRUMENTS

The history of music in New England generally begins with its churches, around which villages and towns were organized and which served not only as houses of worship but also public meeting halls.

Before Winchester was incorporated, residents of the area attended church in Woburn, Medford, and Charlestown. Yet, before any church was organized within Winchester's present boundaries, South Woburn (later incorporated into Winchester) had already established the practice of community singing through its singing schools.

In early America, various controversies surrounded the performance of music in church, including the question of whether skillful singing were sinful. Nevertheless, given the existing desire to sing the psalms properly, singing schools were established in New England—including Boston where a school existed as early as 1717—and spread throughout the colonies during the 18th century. The ability to read music being rare, the early schools simply taught parishioners how to sing in unison by note. The most educated men of the community, the ministers, often led the schools, though instruction was also given by traveling singing masters (one of whom appears in fiction in the person of David Gamut in *The Last of the Mohicans*). Originally meant to reform congregational singing, the schools led to the development of church choirs. Though choirs themselves were also controversial, their increase in number led to the publication of more hymn books and the writing of original compositions.

South Woburn had its own singing schools. David Youngman, reporting to the Winchester Historical & Genealogical Society, recalled them in Woburn as early as 1833 and reported that "there being no lectures, no theatres, or other sources of public amusement, the singing-school was attended by large numbers of almost every age and of every condition."²

Originally, according to Youngman, teachers instructed almost entirely by the use of their own voices, but after several years increasingly used instruments and also included more instruction on vocal method, after 1846 using the blackboard. Each school lasted for a term of 24 sessions, and the usual salary was \$4 per session.



David Youngman

The singing schools did not always meet in churches. "The first singing-school taught in South Woburn of which there is any remembrance," stated Youngman, "was in the winter of 1838-39, in the hall of the once famous Black Horse Tavern." It was led by Joseph Gould, who next taught

in a school house.

In 1840, the church choir formed. Though Stephen Cutter first led the choir, Gould was soon employed to lead the choir and conduct music in the new church. Allegedly, "he had an excellent voice, and generally sung the tenor; but, if occasion required, could sing the soprano equally well."³ He prepared the choir for the church dedication and remained with it for two years. During these years the choir numbered about twenty members.

The third singing school in South Woburn was taught by John Gibson in the vestry of the new Congregational Church. Like Gould he used the violin to accompany his practices. Asa Trowbridge of Newton, a composer, violinist, tenor, and teacher of music, was employed as choir leader in 1843 and also taught the next singing-school, from which a number of singers acceded to the church choir. As choir director, Trowbridge was succeeded by a Mr. Pendergrass (also a tenor) in 1844 and by Alvin Taylor in 1845. Taylor, a merchant, postmaster, and town treasurer who "made an acceptable leader for an ordinary country choir,"⁴ taught a singing-school in 1844-45.

In 1845-46, there arose a difference of opinion over who should teach the singing school. Some favored re-engaging Trowbridge, argued to be the better and more scientific teacher; others preferred Gibson, alleged to be a better musician. Two schools thus ran concurrently (without any ill-will), one in the district schoolhouse, the other in the church vestry.

Another (more acrimonious) difference of opinion arose two years later over the best method of teaching. Youngman, who himself became church choir director in 1846, taught a school in the vestry that winter. The year after, James Greene of Medford began a singing school for which he used a "new system," one that used numerals on one line instead of notes on a five-line staff. In the face of criticism of this method from Youngman, Greene printed a defense in *The Woburn Guide*, stating in part: "It seems that one individual, who dares not meet me in public, has resorted to the honorable course of stabbing in the dark. One expression in my printed notices seems to be the foundation of attack upon me by this magnanimous foe. In these notices I remark that the experienced singer cannot make a decent proficiency in the 'old way.'..."

"...By that expression I intended to find fault with no individual, but only to show the difficulties of the 'old system.' No one but a coward would attack me behind my back, and thus injure my business and take bread from the mouths of my family, giving me no opportunity to defend myself.... "While listening to the singing in your church at the time alluded to, I was struck occasionally with the beautiful sweetness of voice possessed by the female singers.... To my regret, however, the treble voices were frequently overpowered by the loud tones of a certain tenor voice....

"To my mind this presented a striking illustration of the remark made in my lecture, on the necessity of a perfect balance of the parts in order to produce harmony.... He who departs from this obvious and well-known principle in harmony manifests not merely ignorance of his art, but displays the quality of self-esteem, seeking a prominence which the very nature of his position forbids him.... I was told by some one present that this was the voice of your leader."⁵

Youngman claimed this article backfired and killed Greene's school. Youngman, himself not a professional musician but a doctor, apothecary, and book-seller, taught another year and continued as choir director for six. In 1852 James Johnson, a former student and assistant of Lowell Mason, took over as church choir director. He reported finding "a well-organized and united body of singers, evidently well drilled and good music-readers."⁶ He held an evening singing school and also held Saturday morning classes for children and young ladies. The children gave an annual Christmas concert; in 1859, it was reported, over one hundred children participated. Although, as Johnson noted, "a few of the older church members doubted whether it were right to have a piano played in Sunday-school or prayer-meeting,"⁷ from the children's concerts, money was raised to rent a vestry piano.



James C. Johnson

Until Johnson's coming, instrumental accompaniment in the church was provided by the leader's violin, plus whatever instruments might be played by choir members. On the town records of Woburn for 1840 appears a petition to the Parish for the purchase musical instruments for the South Woburn Congregational Church choir; however, in the early years instrumental accompaniment was provided by choir members with their own instruments. These included violin, violino, double bass viol, cello, flutes, and occasionally trombone, orchestral serpent, ophicleide, bassoon, clarinet, and bugle.

The first organ, a small parlor pipe-organ, was installed in 1851 in the gallery. In 1852 it was replaced by a large organ built by Simmons & McIntire. Johnson, thus, in addition to being choir leader, became the first church organist. In the following year the organ was destroyed when the church completely burned. For the new building (1854), a new and larger organ was installed (replaced in 1926). For the same building, the firm of Church and Lane donated a new vestry piano.

Johnson stayed in Winchester until after the Civil War. The war naturally affected the choir, and, although the choir (and school) might have revived afterwards, according to Johnson, an increasing love for congregational and gospel singing "produced a feeling of 'not wanted' among those belonging to volunteer choirs.... Accordingly the members of the 'old choir' that remained after seventeen years under one leadership, one day uncomplainingly took their seats in the pews and the organization ceased to be."⁸ Johnson himself then went to work at the Oliver Ditson store in Boston.

As a succession of religious societies took root in town, new church choirs were formed, and, as they built new church buildings, each society had its own instrument. As in the case of the first church, none of the original nineteenth-century organs survives, all having been replaced after fires or renovations. The first Unitarian church organ (1870), for example, a gift from Emmons Hamlin, was destroyed in the church fire of 1897. A Hook and Hastings organ placed in the new

church building was replaced during renovations in 1929.

With seven different denominations in town, churches have been an important source of community music. In addition to music for Sunday services, churches have held special entertainments and sponsored concerts featuring both local and guest artists, often some of the most eminent recitalists from Boston, a tradition they continue to the present.

CHORAL SOCIETIES

After the singing schools disappeared, interest in community singing persisted. The first choral societies were usually small and often short-lived. But while they lasted, they were enjoyed, and the demise of one was usually followed within few years by the birth of another.



Great stimulus was given to choruses in all towns in New England by the grand Peace Jubilees held in Boston in 1869 and 1872. Produced by bandmaster, Patrick S. Gilmore, the first festival, a National Jubilee to celebrate the end of the Civil War, involved a chorus of 10,000, a band of 500, an orchestra of another 500, plus drum corps and other musical groups. As much a spectacle as a musical event, the jubilee took place in a specially constructed Coliseum in Copley Square that seated 50,000. An immense organ and a great bass drum (with a head 10 to 20 feet in diameter) were also built for the concert.

The Peace Jubilee was a great occasion for the spectators—who included President Grant—as well as the musicians. Over the five days of the festival, major orchestral and choral works, by such masters as Beethoven, Wagner, Handel, Haydn, were performed. Albeit assembling performances of a much more spectacular manner than originally conceived by their creators—as witness the performance of the "Anvil Chorus" from *Il trovatore* by "Grand Chorus, Full Band of One Thousand, One Hundred Anvils [performed by one hundred members of the Boston fire Department], Several Drum Corps, Artillery, Bells, etc."—the jubilee did introduce a number of town choral societies to musical masterworks and associate them with some leading artists of the day.

Before the jubilee took place, its grandiose scale provoked some cynicism. The Middlesex County Journal, for example, commented on the dubious nature of world peace, the money-making aspect of the festival, the need for the organ to be played "in squads," the drum "as large as the rotunda of the state house...the heads of which were made of the hides of Gen. Grant and his twin brother," and the expected presence of President Grant, "who will be present and take part in the exercises by smoking a solo on his cigar—chorus by the Boston fire department."⁹ Yet, after the jubilee was held, the same paper ran the remarks, "The universal verdict is that this is the greatest celebration the country ever beheld, and it is a fitting memorial to the return of peace."¹⁰

The jubilee was such a popular success that, with forces twice as large as in 1869, Gilmore

produced a World Peace Jubilee in 1872 (coming after the end of the Franco-Prussian War). This festival presented four national days— American, British, German, and French, with bands from each of these countries performing. Johann Strauss the Younger came from Vienna to conduct his music and, according to the *Middlesex County Journal*, "was inimitable. He sprang upon the stand, and threw his head in such a manner as to suggest a high mettled horse, rather than a man." World famous artists participated.



The jubilee choruses involved not only singers from Boston, such as the Handel & Haydn Society, but also singing societies from towns for miles around, including Winchester. James Johnson rehearsed the Winchester/Woburn contingent, and Eben Tourjé, the jubilee choir director, traveled from town to town to drill each local chorus.

In 1869, Winchester's chorus was known as a "Choral Society." In 1871, it was succeeded by the Winchester Choral Association, which was active during the 1870s and participated in the second Jubilee. For several years during the 1880s, the Wedge Club (named after Wedge Pond, near which it met), which later became the Clefs, gathered some two dozen local singers together. Announcement of the club's first concert was followed by a comment that "We do not know what the Wedge Club is, who composes it, nor what is the object of its formation, but as it is a Winchester institution we are confident it is worthy of patronage."¹¹

Interesting comments accompanied further choral notices. An article about the Clefs was titled with the question, "Is Winchester a musical town?"¹² In the next decade, when another Winchester Choral Society was formed, another resident answered the question: "It is very much

to be desired that the chorus shall not be given up. ... It must be conceded that Winchester is not a musical town. But certainly if canoe clubs, social clubs, tennis clubs, brass bands, foot-ball elevens and all sorts of associations for everything from dancing the Cotillion to serving for the poor can live and flourish, it seems as if a club devoted to the noblest art—music—might be sustained for a few seasons."¹³

Several other choruses, quartets, glee clubs, and other singing groups have come and gone in Winchester. The longest-lived chorus in the twentieth century was the Mystic Glee Club which gave annual spring concerts from 1940 through 1968. It was formed by a group of 23 men who enjoyed singing in the Winton Club Cabaret of 1940 and formed their own male chorus that February. They sang not only in town but also around New England.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 21, 1992 and of material used in her article, "Music in Winchester, Massachusetts: A Community Portrait, 1830-1925," *American Music*, II:3 (Fall 1994). This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² David Youngman, "Singing-Schools in South Woburn," *The Winchester Record* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1885), p. 39.

³ David Youngman, "The Congregational Church Choir," *The Winchester Record* 1, no. 4 (Oct. 1885), p. 295.

⁴ Youngman, "Choir," p. 298.

⁵ Quoted in Youngman, "Singing-Schools," pp. 46-48.

⁶ James C. Johnson, "The History of the Old Choir of the Congregational Church," *The Winchester Record* 2, no. 2 (Mar. 1886) p. 251

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253

⁹ *Middlesex County Journal*, June 12, 1869.

¹⁰ *Middlesex County Journal*, June 19, 1869

¹¹ *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 9, 1883

¹² *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 11, 1884.

¹³ *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 20 1892.