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THE LIFE AND CHARACTER  
of  
WILLIAM BILLINGS

ABSTRACT OF  
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Clois Ensor  
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## THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF WILLIAM BILLINGS

This study was undertaken because Billings' music, the writing in his theoretical works, and the writing about him indicated that he must have been a very unusual man. His own writing seems to indicate a flamboyant, exuberant and bombastic person. Some of the writers about him give the idea that Billings had started just about everything musical in this country. It was the purpose of this study to try to find out what kind of a person he really was; what his life was like as far as could be determined from the sources available; what he did contribute to the musical life of America; and the nature of his writing about music as it was available from the theory sections of his books and from the words that he wrote for his compositions.

The first chapter deals with the history of music in this country, up to Billings' time, in relation to its possible influence upon his work. The controversy between "regular singing" and those persons who wished to continue in the oral folk tradition is discussed. Since he was a singing master the singing schools prior to his time are introduced. Also because of his prime interest in a cappella singing it was necessary to establish the position of instrumental music in the churches before and during Billings' lifetime. The theory books that were available to him are introduced so that it is possible to understand where he may have received the initial impulse for his own works.

The second chapter relates to those things that are available concerning his life. This deals not only with his own family statistics but also with some of the people he associated with. In connection with the latter, at the time of the revolution, he seems to have been involved with some of the rebels that were instrumental in stirring up the people

prior to the start of hostilities. It is shown in this section that the Stoughton Singing Society was not started by Billings as most writers have indicated as being true. His popularity as a writer and composer and his descent into poverty are depicted through the use of quotations from papers and books written at the time. Billings' death and some of the controversy concerning his final resting place are dealt with at the end of this section.

The third chapter uses extensive quotes from Billings' own writing in order that some kind of evaluation might be made concerning his ideas, the reason for his influence and also that the kind of man he was might be shown.

This study shows that Billings was not the first native composer in the United States. He did not write the first fuguing pieces published in this country. The statement that he was the first professional musician seems difficult to prove. He probably did not introduce the use of the pitch-pipe into church services. Likewise he probably did not introduce the cello or bass into the services. He did not give the first concerts in this country.

Billings was apparently the first native composer in New England. Billings because of his character and to some extent because of his lack of knowledge did write compositions that were fresh and that were liked by the people of his time. Because of his initiative other composers started writing. His greatest contribution seems to have been in the role of teacher. His methods and influence were responsible for the development of the itinerate singing masters, who did so much in their crude way to develop singing in this country.