

Glenn Wilcox. Early American Folk Hymns. Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, 1996.

Early American Folk Hymns is a delightful mating of folk tunes with hymn poems, chiefly of known authorship. Dr. Glenn Wilcox, editor of this journal from its inception, published widely on American hymnody for better than forty years, chiefly in scholarly journals and books. Only months before his death in November, 1995, one of the most popular publishers of collections of American music began systematically to issue anthologies from Dr. Wilcox's lifetime of collecting. Early American Christmas Music was reviewed here in the 1996 commemorative issue dedicated to Dr. Wilcox.

This newest volume, then, is the second in a series of book-length manuscripts for which the Bay Company had signed before the author's death. Dr. Wilcox has supplied vocal and keyboard harmony for fifty-five songs that are principally gapped scale. While some of these hymn poems date from the Elizabethan Age, most come from the past two centuries--much as their tunes do.

The provenance of many of the tunes is popular secular music. The reader may recall that "O Happy Day" derives from the tune of the early nineteenth English drinking song "How Dry I Am" or that "The Lily of the Valley" shares the same Old English air with "The Little Old Sod Shanty" and several other American folksongs.

Musicologist Wilcox ascribes to the "Great Awakening" many of these secular-sacred weddings of worldly tunes to evangelical song poems. John Wesley, evangelizing along the southeastern seaboard of this country, employed his brother Charles as the revival movement's first song leader-music director. As many of their successors have, the Wesleys saw to it that the devil did not have all the good tunes. (Five Charles Wesley hymn poems are here.) Wave after wave of revivalism that required "doctrinally sound" verses begged for camp meeting fervor and improvisation of tune settings. Secular tunes were turned to religious purposes in shotgun weddings of the profane to the sacred. Poetic licence made even mismatches "legal." Earlier Calvinists from France and England expatriated to Switzerland and Holland had left high church "chunes" and formal liturgy for greater emotional abandonment in worship.

Around 180 years ago a few writers-composers began as compilers and publishers to issue their hard-cover oblong songbooks: William Walker's Southern Harmony (1854); Benjamin F. White and E. J. King's The Sacred Harp (1860); Funk, Ruebush-Kieffer, their Kentucky Harmony (1816) et al-- all in shape notes. These geometrically individualized notes, as opposed to round notes, helped the otherwise musically illiterate to read musical notation chiefly through itinerant singing school teachers' classes on the frontier. Scorned by musical sophisticates, these singing school-distributed compilations prepared the way for commercial gospel music "convention books" in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Writes Dr. Wilcox on this particularly German-American offspring of revivalism and syncopation: "'Saints Bound for Heaven'...Both lyrics and air have indications of camp meeting origin, and if performed slightly uptempo, one can hear elements of the coming ragtime-influenced gospel song."

Dr. Wilcox has included "some alterations in tune for modern use, i.e...[keys changed to] a more singable range...new harmonizations and accompaniments...[and] some metrical alignments of poetic and musical accents."

This volume not only indexes first lines, writers and composers and table of contents, but also offers a two-page bibliography, eight pages of the author's notes and two pages of introduction.

Whether the singer grew up with Dr. Wilcox fa-sol-la-ing from the Southern Harmony at Benton, Kentucky's Big Singin' or with the reviewer, cutting his teeth on the family's 1871 Temple Star in the Missouri Ozarks, here in Early American Folk Hymns is God's plenty: the familiar valedictories "The Parting Hand" and "Never Part Again," almost as well-used as the later "God Be With You ('Till We Meet Again)"; Abraham Lincoln's favorite hymn, "I Am Bound for the Promised Land" ("On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand") carried by William Walker's unique melody in "Sweet Prospect," "[There Is a] Happy Land"; the metrics and some of the diction of Woodward's "The Old Oaken Bucket" in "Family Bible"; "How Tedious and Tasteless" in John Newton's "Green Fields"; Robert Robinson's "Come Thou Fount" as "Olney" in Chapin's lesser known musical setting.

This is a volume equally in place at home, in the school or public library. The late editor of the Journal of this Society thanks Mrs. Helen Wilcox, for "scholarly work and achievements...[as] my co-laborer in this and other projects....Her Knowledge, patience, and skill have expedited and contributed immeasurably to this compilation."

Consumers of this feast of folk hymns will also be grateful.

Walter D. Haden
Department of English
The University of Tennessee at Martin