

MUSIC IN NOVA SCOTIA 1605 - 1867

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PART I

THE early attempts at music in Nova Scotia have passed beyond our ken and unlike the first attempts at literature and painting which have survived for the judgment of posterity we have no way of evaluating early musical efforts. There are few records to tell us about the various musical achievements, still fewer to inform us about the quality of these concerts or the ability of the performers. The older Nova Scotia newspapers, of which the *Halifax Gazette* of 1752 was the first in Canada, did not always mention musical events in passing. Often our knowledge is limited to an advertisement of a tantalizing line or two, and when fuller notices of musical entertainments are given they are obviously more complimentary than discerning.¹

In Nova Scotia, which is proud of its first things, Marc Lescarbot made the earliest transcription of North American music when he listened outside Membertou's wigwam to some Micmac songs and took down the words and music, which may be found in the third volume of the Champlain Society's edition of Lescarbot. In 1605 the tiny settlement at Port Royal was the only one of white men in North America with the exception of the Spanish colonies in Florida. The French came from a country where music had been a popular form of recreation for centuries, and like all Latins they also delighted in dancing. Above all, they were members of the Roman Catholic Church which for over a thousand years had encouraged music as an essential feature of the services of the church. Father Fleché, who came to Port Royal in 1610, soon began teaching the Micmaes how to sing the simplest parts of the church service.

1. This article is based on newspapers, books, documents and musical programmes in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia at Halifax, and scrapbooks of Mrs. J. McD. Taylor and Miss Elsie Taylor in the possession of Miss A. B. Taylor Halifax. I am indebted for information to Mr. Ifan Williams and Miss Toomey of the Conservatory Staff, Miss Florence Blackwood, Mrs. G. Fred Pearson, Miss Ada Hoyt, Mrs. J. Gillis, Mrs. Clarence Anderson, Mr. R. M. Hattie, Mr. C. St. C. Stayner and others of Halifax; and to Miss H. Louise Burchell of Windsor, Mrs. Elizabeth Coward, Bridgetown, Miss Shirley Blakeley, then of Wolfville and now of Newcastle, N. B.; and Mr. Charles McLearn of Elmsdale, Hants Co., N. S. I wish to thank particularly Mr. Harry Dean of the Maritime Academy of Music for his kindness in securing papers of the Orpheus Club and the Halifax (Philharmonic) Society and making them available to me, and to Mr. Donald Mackay, Miss Gene Morrison and Mr. George McLaren for pointing out many newspaper items I might otherwise have overlooked; and especially Dr. D. C. Harvey, Provincial Archivist for his interest and suggestions, and the other members of the Archives Staff.

After the baptism of twenty-one Micmacs on St. John the Baptist Day, 1610, the new converts joined the French gentlemen, soldiers and labourers in singing the *Te Deum*. When Chief Martin was baptized, Poutrincourt was surprised to see how devoutly the Indians listened to the service which was sung to music he himself had composed. This may have been the first music composed in Canada.

Acadia soon began its role as a battleground between France and England. Through the years of strife these French peasants were busy wresting a living from the land. The Acadians were self-reliant French pioneers, practical craftsmen who found their pleasures in sociable leisure. Remembering the love of the French for music and dancing and knowing some of their folk music we can easily imagine the gay songs as the women went about their household tasks, or as the men cut wood, and as the family gathered around the fires on cold winter evenings to sing such beautiful chansons as *Nanon*, *Malbrouck*, or *La Passion*, already familiar in the twelfth century. The boys and girls from the neighbourhood might be dancing to the strains of the fiddle or to *La Boulangere* or *Je l'ai vu voler le ruban*, or other ballads so delightful for dancing.

The founding of Halifax in 1749 marked the beginning of British effort to settle the province and to regain it from the French. At first these rude houses among the stumps in the new capital of 2,500 English settlers may appear to have little importance in the musical development of Nova Scotia. But Halifax's reputation as a city which loved and encouraged fine band music dates to its founding when the first British regiments stationed at this old seaport brought their bands with them. Besides providing stirring music for the troops and civilians, these bandsmen brought with them a knowledge and training in music from the old country. The church had always played an important role in the musical development of Nova Scotia, particularly St. Paul's Anglican Church in Halifax which has the oldest choir in the province, and St. Matthew's where the dissenting protestants worshipped. The Thanksgiving for the recovery of King George III from one of his attacks of insanity, referred to as "from his late indisposition", was celebrated on May 20, 1789 by a divine service at St. Paul's when, according to the *Royal Gazette*, "the service was accompanied with Musick chosen from the Works of Handel—*The Final Chorus of the Messiah and the Coronation Anthem*—performed by several Gentlemen and the Musick Bands of the Regiments

here on duty; who, with the Organ, did great justice to those *Manly and Pathetic Compositions.*"

For the first time in Nova Scotia there was a class of officers, officials and wealthy merchants who had sufficient money, leisure and interest to foster culture and to patronize the theatre and music. But what music did they have in Halifax? London was in the hey-day of Handel and Haydn, while Gluck's lovely dances and beautiful arias were affected by fashionable music lovers. Surely some Governor's wife or daughter brought a harpsichord to Halifax and at evening parties Halifaxians danced and sang madrigals. Doubtless there were violins and cellos, flutes and flageolets, but in the letters and diaries of the time music is seldom mentioned. Music and musical instruments were imported from England by various merchants. In 1752 John Smith advertised guitars and violins among other English goods for sale. Among the jewellery, sand boxes, tea-paper, "Landscips & Paintings on Glass" that Robert Fletcher had imported from London on the ship *Diamond* in August 1770 were German Flutes and Violins, Holmes's and Cunningham's Duets, books of Scotch tunes, fiddle strings and ruled music books.

It is in 1785, after the prosperity of the American Revolution and the coming of the Loyalists, when the population of Halifax had risen to 5,000, that I have found the first newspaper advertisement of a concert, although others may have taken place previously. *The Nova Scotia Gazette and the Weekly Chronicle* of February 22, 1785 announced:

A CONCERT

AT THE GOLDEN BALL

On THURSDAY the Third of MARCH next,
To conclude with a BALL.—TICKETS, at HALF
A GUINEA, each, to be had of Mr. O'BRIEN,
Mr. HOWE, and Mr. HENRY.
N.B. To begin at 6 o'clock—No more Tickets to be
disposed off than the Room will conveniently
accommodate.

In the eighteenth century musical entertainments continued to be presented in the inns and coffee houses instead of in the Grand or Royal Theatre. Mrs. Mechtler gave *A Consort of Vocal and Instrumental Music* at Mrs. Sutherland's Coffee House on September 29, 1790. During the concert Mrs. Mechtler sang a number of songs such as Dibdin's "Was I a Shepherd's

Maid to Keep" and several selections from "the much admired Opera of Rosina." She was assisted by the Master of the 20th Regiment who played a Concerto on the Harpsicord, and his band concluded the performance with an Overture of Bach's.

Plans were made in 1792 to hold a musical concert once a fortnight at the British Tavern. The advertisement in the *Royal Gazette and N. S. Advertiser* stressed the select nature of the performance for "None but LADIES AND GENTLEMEN can be admitted.—On entering the CONCERT-ROOM each Gentleman to Pay Two shillings and Six-pence; and each LADY One shilling and Three-pence. The CONCERT to begin half-past Seven and end half-past NINE. N.B. Any GENTLEMAN performer may be at Liberty to Play in CONCERT." A number of concerts were presented in the 1790's when Halifaxians heard good music by contemporary European composers who were famous at the time such as Pleyel, Vogel, and Leopold Kotzeluch. At the Benefit Concert for Mr. Scavoys in December, 1797 a "Simphonie" by Kotzeluch and the "Concertante for Violin, Hautboy and Violincello" by Pleyel were performed. Both Kotzeluch and Pleyel, who was considered the most famous composer of the late eighteenth century, arranged Scottish songs for George Thompson of Edinburgh.

The outlying districts of the province did not have the musical advantages of Halifax. The Expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 left empty and desolate some of the most fertile and pleasant lands in Nova Scotia. About 5,000 New Englanders came to the Annapolis Valley seeking more fertile farms, while fishermen from Cape Cod, searching for land nearer the Grand Banks, settled along the south shore. These New Englanders had to work hard to get enough food for themselves and their families for they had none of our modern machinery. It was not a life to induce much interest in the fine arts. Simeon Perkins, a New Englander who became the leading merchant of Liverpool, a justice of the peace and a member of the assembly, noted in the diary he kept for over forty years that on February 23, 1777 he spent "the evening at Mr. Joseph Tinkham's singing psalm tunes. I have for about six weeks attended all the evenings I could conveniently, on a school for that purpose, taught by Mr. Amasa Braman, a gentleman that came here from Halifax the beginning of winter . . . He is a native of Connecticut and graduated at Yale Colledge." Mr. Perkins noted on April 3, 1778 that "in the afternoon, Mr. Braman, ye singing master, has a singing in the new Meeting House, and delivers

an oration upon musick. A very genteel performance, and the singing was by good judges thought extraordinary for the time we have been learning." But music failed to support the teacher and in 1778 Mr. Braman left Liverpool to escape his debts. There were many other singing schools in the province, but they were also short-lived. With the Loyalist immigration the population of Nova Scotia doubled from 20,000 to 40,000. In Halifax Reuben M'Farlen offered instruction to the young Gentlemen and Ladies in the Rules of Psalmody in 1788. For fifteen shillings a quarter any "decent person" over the age of ten could receive instruction four evenings a week from 6 to 9 o'clock, and the Master promised to provide "a convenient Room with Seats and Benches, Fire, Candles and Spruce Beer."

In many churches it was customary for the minister to read a verse, then for the people to sing it, until the Psalm was finished. This practice of lining or deaconing lingered on far into the nineteenth century in country districts where hymn books were scarce. John B. Calkin relates that at one evening service the "minister's eye-sight was much impaired, and he had forgotten to bring his spectacles. Wishing to state the facts to the congregation, he unwittingly fell into rhyme and measure suited to a familiar tune, as follows:

The light is bad, my eyes are dim,
I cannot see to read the hymn.

The choir, supposing this to be part of the hymn, sang the lines with accustomed fervor. The minister, intending to call attention to the mistake, said—

I did not say to sing this hymn,
I only said my eyes were dim.

These lines were also rendered in appropriate style, and then the minister said:

I think the d---l is in you all,
I did not say to sing at all."

At the opening of the nineteenth century the majority of musical entertainments continued to take place at Halifax, where the population now approached 9,000. Although some performances were still presented at the Theatre Royal or the British Coffee House a far more suitable auditorium for concerts was provided by the Mason's Hall on Barrington Street, in what was then the extreme south end of the town. A love of

singing was kept alive in the home and at meetings of patriotic societies. In the 1820's and 1830's a number of concerts were given in the towns of Nova Scotia, particularly at the capital, by artists touring the United States, for Halifax was a regular port of call for ships from England to the United States. Mr. Keene gave several concerts in Halifax in 1828 to the general satisfaction and delight of his audience who rapturously encored his "Blue Bonnets" and "Gathering of the McGregors". The concert was not without flaw as young Joseph Howe, editor of the *Novascotian*, suggested "to our Magistrates, and Police Officers, the propriety of keeping peace and decorum in the streets adjoining the Lodge, on the next evening; because the performance on Monday was repeatedly interrupted by all kinds of discordant noises, and several persons effected an entrance to the Hall through the back windows, and others threw dirt and offal in, to the great annoyance both of the Singer and the audience." Judging from this behaviour, not all Haligonians encouraged musical concerts! When Messrs. Hermann and Company, members of the Royal Conservatory of Munich, presented their Soiree Musicale in November, 1832, the Mason's Hall was crowded to suffocation, but "the performances well rewarded the audience for the endurance of a temperature but a few degrees below that of a Vapour Bath." Nova Scotians continued to be very fond of concerts, which ranged from band concerts to a full orchestra, and amateurs continued to give such entertainments. The performers were largely drawn from the bands of the Imperial regiments or the navy, or from officers and their wives who had received their musical training abroad. The training of the permanent residents of the city was accomplished by singing schools and amateur glee clubs.

In the second and third decades of the nineteenth century Nova Scotians experienced an intellectual awakening which was to have far reaching influence on their political, economic, social and cultural life. Although there had been a large immigration after the Napoleonic Wars, the majority of the 200,000 people living in Nova Scotia in 1838 had been born and bred in the province which had now advanced beyond the pioneering state when every effort had to be concentrated on earning a living. Thus the rise of local patriotism for the province of their birth became a natural development.

In the shire towns musical societies were established as part of the cultural flowering of the intellectual awakening.

On December 5th, 1828 "several of the Gentlemen of the Town of Lunenburg" met at the National School House to form a Singing Society called the "Lunenburg Harmonic Society". The object of the society was "to promote the singing of sacred music" by meeting every Friday evening, winter and summer. The society was confined to the sterner sex—the ladies of Lunenburg being considered as visiting members only. Twenty-four gentlemen became charter members of the society which continued to meet regularly until September, 1830. This Harmonic Society appears to have merged in the St. John's Singing Society organized on December 17th, 1830. Rev. J. C. Cochran who had been President of the Harmonic Society, was President of this society also, and many names of members of the Harmonics appear on the roll of St. John's, which flourished for at least three years. The purpose of the St. John's Singing Society was "to promote the Singing of Sacred Music, and more particularly to improve the Church Choir."

At Antigonish the gentlemen and young lads of the village formed a Musical Society about 1844 with Hon. Alexander McDougall, lawyer, poet and Member of the Legislative Council, as President and Director. Lacking the advantages of Halifax in population, music teachers and Imperial bands, they prepared to overcome these handicaps by hiring Herr Kaestner, late bandmaster of the 43rd Regiment, who not only directed the society and gave music lessons to children and adults, but formed a band, taught the members how to play and arranged music for them. At first the band had only fifteen instruments, but five more were purchased because here in Antigonish they could not borrow more from an Imperial band or hire a few bandsmen as was the practice at Halifax. Most of the villagers wholeheartedly supported the Musical Society, either because they enjoyed music as a welcome diversion to country life, or because they were proud that Antigonish was one of the few towns in Nova Scotia to have a band! As the children were not neglected, a solid foundation was laid for future musical progress in the community. About 250 people filled the tastefully ornamented concert room to overflowing for the benefit of Mr. Kaestner on May 6, 1846. Indeed, a musical concert was such a novelty that several carriages drove forty miles over bad roads from Guysborough to Antigonish! The band played simple pieces like the Grand March from Norma, the Prince of Wales' Quadrille and the Duke of York's March. Mr. Kaestner later removed to Guysborough to form a band there.

The Scots who came to Pictou in the ship *Hector* in 1773, vanguard of the great Scottish immigration of the 19th century, had an even harder struggle for existence than the New Englanders and had no time to devote to cultural pursuits. They brought with them a heritage of Scots songs and dances, and they marched ashore to the skirling of the bagpipes. By 1830, Pictou rivalled Halifax both in population and as an intellectual centre. The musical achievements of the mid-century were solidly based on the singing society and instruction in sacred vocal music by such men as William Loramore, who was teaching "Sacred Vocal Music" three evenings a week in 1836 for five shillings a month in the room occupied by the Pictou Singing Society. In 1842 J. Stewart M'Arthur was giving instruction in violin and flute three evenings a week and conducting a singing class the other three. Two Amateur Musical Concerts were presented at the Court House in Pictou in March, 1842. The Pictou Philharmonic Society gave a series of concerts at Pictou Academy during the winter of 1856-57.

In Pictou County there were a number of brass bands. According to the *Novascotian* of 1852 the popular Mr. Foster known "as an arranger and composer of music" directed both the Pictou Philharmonic Society and the Brass Band. In 1857 the Albion Mines Brass Band made great progress under the tuition of Mr. Robert Wilson who had studied music under several Professors of that art from the United States. Mr. Robert Redpath "whose attainments in vocal and instrumental music" were "very favorably known" organized a flute band with thirty-three teen aged boys at Albion Mines, and he was presented with "a very handsome silver watch, gold chain and appendages" in appreciation of his skill, untiring zeal and urbane manner.

Increasing prosperity based on an economy of wood, wind and sail, a wider knowledge of the world and an awareness of their intellectual powers had given Nova Scotians confidence in themselves and their destiny. The winning of responsible government had freed Nova Scotians politically and culturally and offered an opportunity to create their own schools of architecture, painting, literature and music. As we have seen, examples of fine music and accomplished artists were not lacking, Nova Scotians thoroughly trained in music abroad were returning to their homeland to teach others and audiences were ready to support concerts. Circumstances appeared propitious for a Golden age of musical development.