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MUSIC IN HALIFAX, 1749-1799

IN HIS *History of Music in Canada*, Helmut Kallmann noted that initial groundwork on the beginning of music in the Maritimes was sadly lacking. Published material concerning the music of the earliest settlers in Nova Scotia is limited to a few general articles and some incidental references to music in works on such related subjects as theatre and culture. A thorough study has yet to be made.

The following is part of a larger investigation into the history of music in the province. The sources are few—newspaper accounts and advertisements, church records, diaries, and general historical accounts. The sparse findings reflect the obvious fact that early settlers must spend most of their time and energies on urgent material needs in order to carve a settlement out of the wilderness.

It is not unusual that a new community first functions with the church as its centre, and as a general pattern in the early settlements in Nova Scotia, the earliest records of music are those related to the churches. As a community grows, coffee-houses become the centres of popular folk music for recreation. Formal concerts and concert halls develop after this. This general outline describes the situation in Halifax in the late eighteenth century.

Church music in Halifax necessarily begins with St. Paul's Church. The first effort of the founding settlers in 1749 was to name their church officially and begin construction. Since no record was kept which named the hymns or psalms sung in the early days of the church, we must assume the first settlers brought with them the music of the Church of England. No early hymnals remain, nor is there any mention of any hymnal by name. Occasional letters to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel from early Halifax settlers asking for additional hymnals tell us that hymns were definitely sung and that some hymnal was used, but the exact book remains unknown. The first record of any choir music is in the church records for 1767, when a Mr. Collins

was appointed clerk. For this, plus his duties as sexton, he received a yearly payment of £25. There is no mention of the size of the choir nor of the works performed.

In several books discussing the early history of Halifax, a favourite tale concerns the origin of the first organ at St. Paul's. The story tells of a Spanish vessel captured on the high seas by a British man-of-war. The ship was taken to Halifax harbour where the cargo, including an organ destined for a Roman Catholic chapel in South America, was auctioned off. The organ was presented to St. Paul's. The date of the incident is usually recorded as 1763, and since the details of the story have little variation, we can assume a common source.

The church records and the letters to the S.P.G. tell a different and less romantic story. Colonial Office Records of January 9, and S.P.G. Records of January 11, 1762, show letters from St. Paul's Church stating that a collection was currently under way to raise £400 to purchase an organ. At that point some of the money had already been remitted to Joshua Mauger, Esq., agent to the province, and the S.P.G. was asked for a donation. The two letters differ concerning amounts already collected. The letter of January 9 is from churchwarden Jonathan Belcher remitting £100 to the Lords of Trade to be added to the £105 already submitted to be put towards the purchase of the organ.¹ The Reverend John Breynton's letter of January 11 mentions that £250 had already been sent to Mauger.² Additional payments were made to the agent, and in 1763 Belcher wrote to the S.P.G. asking for help in repaying £57 2s 4d borrowed from an individual to make one of the payments.

On October 11, 1765, Reverend Breynton wrote to the S.P.G. stating that he believed the organ to have been already constructed in London. He again asked for financial aid to pay Mauger, this time for 50 or 60 Guineas. He stated that he believed that the Indians would be more inclined to "Conform to our Worship when they saw it accompanied with the solemnity of music for which they all have a natural turn."²

The organ from London was delivered in early 1766, and installed by a Mr. Evans, who became the first organist, being officially voted to the position on September 29, 1767, for a salary of £50 per year. Since no organist did as well for the next sixty years, Evans was singularly fortunate in acquiring this large amount for his services.

Upon delivery of the organ, Mauger presented the parish with a final bill of £76 18s 10½d which was to be paid to Mr. Evans. The Church had a

projected budget for the year 1768, which would make up the needed amount. In January, 1768, however, Evans asked for payment immediately so that he could leave for Barbados. To raise the funds the local merchant Joshua Gerrish was asked for a loan of £77. Evans was paid and left. The parish records note that the loan from Gerrish was still owed in 1769, but there is no record of payment.

The last episode in this story did not take place until 1788, when the records note a bill from Mauger for "freight and other charges upon the organ" amounting to £86 1s 7d and interest on the unpaid debt (owed for 20 years) at £86 1s 7d, making a total bill of £172 3s 2d. Mauger had died earlier than this date, and it is also curious that there is no previous notation of a bill from Mauger for this amount. The notation in the records of 1767 indicates that the vestry believed the £76 18s 10½d paid to Evans to be the last money outstanding on the instrument. On January 7, 1788, the parish voted to pay the principal but not the interest. A week later they rescinded the vote to pay Mauger even the principal. The debt is never mentioned again. This organ remained in service until it was replaced in 1841 by a new organ fitted in the old frame.

The earliest reference to the type of church music heard in Halifax was another letter to the S.P.G. The Reverend Mr. Wood wrote of a service in July, 1767, which he conducted at St. Paul's for the Micmac Indians, and reported that the Indians sang an anthem before and after the service.

The music heard in St. Paul's after installation of the organ was not to everyone's liking. Viere Warner was chosen as organist in 1768, to succeed Evans. The clerk was named Godfrey, and in 1770 both Godfrey and Warner came under heavy criticism:

Voted that whereas, the Anthems Sung by the Clerk and the others in the Gallery, during Divine Service have not Answered the intention of raising the Devotion of the congregation to the Honour and Glory of [God], in as much as the Major Part of the Congregation do not understand either the Words or the Musick and cannot join therein,

Therefore for the future the clerk have express orders not to Sing any such Anthems, or leave his usual Seat without directions have first [been] Obtained from the Reverend Mr. Breynton.

Voted that whereas: also the Organist discovers a light mind in the several tunes he plays, called Voluntaries to the great offence of the Congregation, and tending to disturb, rather than promote true Devotion.

Therefore he be directed for the Future to make a choice of such his Voluntaries, and that he also for the future be directed to play the Psalm Tunes in a plain Familiar Manner without unnecessary Graces.³

(This criticism of Warner put him in good company. Approximately 64 years earlier J. S. Bach was dismissed from his position as organist in Arnstadt for confusing the congregation by elaboration on the hymns.)

This statement in the church records is also important inasmuch as it states definitely that the early Halifax settlers used anthems and psalms in their devotion. The "voluntaries" mentioned in the criticism were free pieces for organ often played in connection with a church service and sometimes improvised. Compositions in this style were written by some of the best (and of the worst) composers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

In 1769, a "Bellows Blower" first entered the financial record books. He received a salary of 12s per year, but this was raised to £1 6s by 1788. The organist did not fare so well. Warner was engaged for £40 as a successor to Evans, who, as noted above, had received £50. Warner kept the position until 1776. John Selby took over in that year and received only £25, which was increased to £40 in 1792. When sickness kept him from his duties his salary was docked and when on vacation he was required to provide and pay for his own substitute. Even the final increase to £40 called for the added duties of clerk.

In June, 1770, "Two Bands of music" went in procession to St. Paul's for the celebration of the festival of St. John the Baptist.⁴ The first record of a large musical presentation in St. Paul's is from a newspaper account in 1789. At the celebration of Divine Service on May 26, the "Final Chorus of the Messiah and the Coronation Anthem by Handel" were performed by "Several gentlemen and the music Bands of the Regiments who played with the organ."⁵ The only other record of this type to be found in the first fifty years is a notice in 1795: "A charity sermon to be preached on Sunday for benefit of Sunday Schools in this town. An Hymn adapted to the occasion will also be sung; in which a part of the Band belonging to the Royal Fuzileers will assist."⁵

Among the earliest settlers in Halifax was a group of Germans who arrived in 1750. By 1753, many of them had moved to Lunenburg, but those who remained in Halifax established their own church, St. George's, which was built in 1756. The ministers from St. Paul's preached in St. George's from time to time and eventually a large part of the service changed from German to English. The only evidence of music in this church is a note in the Parish

records of 1811, resolving to retain "The Psalmody of our native language as the only relic of our native worship". Later, when the congregation aligned itself with the Church of England, the German psalmody was all that remained of the early practices.

St. Matthew's Church began as a Dissenters Congregation with supply ministers mostly from the Bay Colony. The Dissenters organized within a month after the arrival of the first settlers but used St. Paul's Church for services until their own meeting house was constructed in 1754. Since the Dissenters did not bring their own minister with them from England, it is possible that the music of St. Matthew's was somewhat different from that sung at St. Paul's. The influence of the Boston supply ministers on the Halifax Congregation may have introduced use of the *Bay Psalm Book* or others of the psalm books and hymnals that had been put out by the colonists. These books did not differ widely from the English tradition, but a century of rewriting poetry and selecting hymn tunes from other national influences made some changes from the British practice.

In addition to the Boston influence, one of the temporary ministers at St. Matthew's was the Reverend James Lyon from Princeton, New Jersey. In 1761, Lyon published *Urania*, a collection of psalm tunes, hymns and anthems from the popular collections together with six of Lyon's own pieces. Lyon spent the year 1765 in Halifax and then moved on to Pictou, to Onslow, and then back to New England in 1771. In none of these places does any evidence exist to tell which hymns or hymn books were used by this minister. We know only that Lyon was interested in music and perhaps would have encouraged the use of his own book.

The *Bay Psalm Book* was widely circulated both in the colonies and in England. Haddy speculates that it was used in St. Matthew's Church, but he gives no evidence.⁶ At present in the library of St. Matthew's there is a twentieth-century reprint of the first edition (1640) which may have been Lyon's source. Also in the library are several eighteenth-century Books of Common Prayer with the Sternhold and Hopkins version of the Psalms. A catalogue of the Church library completed in 1837 shows other such collections.

The Congregation of Dissenters was joined by increasing numbers of Presbyterians, and by 1783 a long argument broke out concerning the singing at church services and the source of the ministers. The Congregationalists on one side wanted to sing the hymns of Isaac Watts and draw a minister from the New England States. The Presbyterians insisted on singing Psalms

only and on having a minister from Scotland. The minutes of January 16, 1787, record the solution: Watts' hymns were to be sung and the minister drawn from Scotland.⁷ The use of Watts' hymns lasted until 1853.

One of the many things to which the Dissenters objected in the Anglican Church Service was the adoption of the Catholic practice of using an organ in church. The Dissenters brought with them the European practice of using a stringed instrument called a "kirk fiddle" to accompany singing. In historical accounts the instrument is variously called "bass viol" and "violin". The instrument currently on display in St. Matthew's and called "kirk fiddle" is a 'cello. There is no identification on the instrument as to maker or year of construction, and there is no record of its purchase. The reason for calling the instrument "bass viol" could have been the eighteenth-century European practice of accompanying singing with a viola da gamba which looks like a 'cello and is often called a bass viol. The label "violin" is often assigned to the entire family of bowed string instruments, and it is possible that the historian did not know the various names for the different instruments, or even did not see the instrument and assumed that the word "fiddle" was a synonym for violin. It is also possible that the instrument used to accompany the services was, at various times, a violin, a 'cello, and a bass viol, according to the availability of someone who owned and played a string instrument.

It was not until 1873 that a pipe organ was installed, and then it was with a great deal of difficulty because of the Presbyterian dislike of the use of an organ in church.

The earliest indications of secular music in Halifax is a newspaper advertisement of 1752, in which Henry Meriton offered dancing lessons to men and women. Although this notice does not directly mention music, it suggests that some way of making music was available. A year later Meriton advertised again, but this time as man-midwife, surgeon, and apothecary! It would appear that dancing lessons did not catch on, and there were several more years before the existence of instruments was actually spelled out in documents.

In April, 1755, Hannah Hutchinson advertised French and country dancing lessons, and this again suggests instruments of some type—in this case probably a violin. Apart, however, from this type of notice, implying the accompaniment of some sort of instrumental music, it is not until the 1761 advertisement of Jacob Althus that we can find reports of a musician in Halifax. On May 21, 1761, Althus advertised that he taught "German flute, violin, French horn, Hautboy, Basson [sic], or any other instrument of the like

kind".⁸ He probably owned at least one or two of these and we might speculate that there were several other musicians in Halifax at the time to create some sort of informal music.

After 1761, an average of one advertisement per year offered instruments of various kinds for sale. The sellers were those involved in general selling, such as Robert Fletcher, who sold dry goods, furniture, and food but would also advertise on occasion "German flutes, violins, books of instruction for the same. Also books of Scots tunes, etc."⁴ And Hall, Bremner, and Bottomley who had for sale "2 elegant fine ton'd harpsichords. One of them double keyed with spare setts [sic] of strings and new music".⁵ Newspaper editor William Minns sold books of sonatas by Haydn, Boccherini, and Stamitz.⁹ Notices of vocal teaching in Halifax come from a newspaper announcement that Reuben M'Farlen would teach the rules of psalmody;¹⁰ and an entry in Simeon Perkins' Diary to the effect that Mr. Amasa Braman conducted a singing school in Halifax until 1778.¹¹

Starting approximately in 1788, various groups began to produce dramatic works in Halifax and on some occasions a few songs were included to round out the programme.¹² These presentations were usually quite long: it was not unusual for two or three dramatic productions to be staged on the same evening along with a lecture, and sometimes songs were presented between plays. Evidence of this activity again comes from the newspapers which advertised the productions but never reviewed or commented on them. Often the advertising would announce the play without naming the author, and the singer without naming the song or composer.

The first use of the word "concert" occurred in a newspaper advertisement in 1785 of a concert at the Golden Ball (a coffee-house) which was to conclude with a Ball.⁹

The first full concert presented in Halifax which advertised the programme was presented on September 29, 1790. The place of presentation was listed only as "the coffee house" but there is good reason to believe that this meant the "Golden Ball", which was the place used for many large gatherings:

To-Morrow Evening,
the 29th Instant.
Will be performed, at the Coffee-House
A CONCERT
of
Vocal and Instrumental Music
in three acts.

act 1

Overture, composed by Toeschi.

Quartetto ditto Davaux.

A Song of Dibdin — Was I a Shepherd's Main to keep

by Mrs. Mechtler.

Overture, composed by Bach

end of the 1st act

act 2d

Overture, composed by Mebes.

Giordani's Ronda of Heart beating — by Mrs.

Mechtler

Quartetto, of Avesons.

end of act 2d

A concerto on the Harpsichord — by the Master of the

20th Band.

act 3d

Overture by Abel.

A song, by Mrs. Mechtler

Quartetto, by Vanhall.

A favourite Song out of *Rosina* — by Mrs. Mechtler

The Concert to conclude with an Overture of

Bach's.⁵

Whether the accompaniments, overtures, quartettos, and concerto were all performed on the solo harpsichord or by other musicians from the 20th band is not known. The fact that the service bands were present in Halifax from time to time is verified by an occasional newspaper notice, such as the following from 1788, reporting a ceremony at Government House in honour of Prince William Henry. He was received "with the beating of drum and the music playing God Save the King".⁹

Notices of singing at dramatic presentations in the following months mention Mrs. Mechtler as soloist and usually a song from *Rosina* — a Ballad-opera by William Shield.

On January 25, 1791, another concert presented Mrs. Mechtler singing songs from "Cymon" and "Galatea" by Handel as well as:

The Duet of Damon and Cleora

A Scotch Song, Of Jenny's Marriage with Auld Robin Gray

The Soldiers Tir'd of War's Alarms⁵

It was often the custom to hold "A Ball for the Ladies and Gentlemen"

immediately after concerts and plays. Tickets for the entire evening were 5s. A. R. Jewitt believes that these plays were usually four hours long.¹²

The concert programme advertised for July 6, 1791, gives more evidence to suggest an instrumental ensemble. The concert included art songs, folk songs by Mrs. Mechtler, and 4 symphonies (one credited to Bach), 2 bugle-horn solos, and a concerto performed by Mr. Shaffer, the Master of the 21st band. The notice mentions that Mr. Shaffer "Will lead the concert", and this suggests more than a single instrumentalist.⁵ Two weeks later a rather bizarre combination of concert and lecture included several "Lectures on Heads" alternating with an overture by Bach, a Quartetto by Katzwara, an Overture by Stamitz, an overture by Rebus, the glee "Hark, Hark, the Lark" by "four voices that never sung on this stage before", an overture by Abel, and concluded with a "Grand Military Symphony" by Shaffer.⁵ On January 2, 1792, the notice of a concert to be held at the British Tavern contains the note ("N.B."): "Any gentleman performer may be at liberty to play in Concert".⁵

The next notice of music comes a full year later, on January 15, 1793, and advertises a concert of rather heavy content. The music was to be overtures, symphonies, trios, and quartets by Haydn, Pleyel, Katzwara, Kummell, Davaux, Bach, and Lord Kelly. The price of tickets had now gone up to £1 6s.⁵

Two concerts stand out because of rather exceptional programmes and of the variety of instruments that they suggest must have been present in Halifax for their presentation:

April 1, 1796:

Symphony a Grand Orchestre — Pleyel
 Song
 Concerte for the Clarinette
 Symphony Concertante — Pleyel
 New Symphony — Pichl
 Symphony Concertante for 2 violins
 Song — The Soldier Tired of War's Alarms
 Quartette — Pleyel
 Trio for Horns
 Chorus
 New Symphony — Schmit Bauer⁵

And a concert containing what looks like several of the same numbers three years later:

April 2, 1799

Symphony — Schmittbaur

Concerto — flute
 Song
 Trio — 3 horns
 2 Symphonies
 concerto — Clarinett
 song
 Quartetto — clarinetto
 Symphony — Pichl⁵

The performance by a "balance master" (acrobat?) occasioned the first public notice of an orchestra. "Mr. Hackley will be attended with a full Orchestre, and a Song in Character".⁵

The first opera in Halifax was the comic opera "The Padlock" by Charles Dibdin presented in July, 1791. The next notice of opera was "The Duenna" by Sheridan, which was played on January 29, 1793. The advertisement mentioned the insertions of some new songs but did not name the singers or describe the nature of the accompaniment. Six weeks later another comic opera, *Love in a Village*, was presented. No other notices of operas occurred until March, 1794, when the opera *Rosina* was finally presented in full after Mrs. Mechtler had sung songs from the work for three years. On the same evening Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* was also presented.

The next opera was presented in February, 1796; *The Castle of Andalusia* and the next month *The Humours of a Village*.

The month of March, 1798, stands out with four changes of programme at the Theatre Royal, three of them musical:

March 6, the opera "No Song No Supper"
 March 20, same opera plus a Ballet Dance
 March 30, "The Duenna"

In June, the opera *Rosina* was presented again and in September *My Grandmother*. This was the last opera before the turn of the century.

The arrival in Halifax of Edward Augustus, eventually named Duke of Kent, is generally cited as the beginning of music and drama for the province. He arrived in Halifax in the summer of 1794, and stayed a little over four years. He is usually credited with being responsible for the theatre in Halifax and for bringing a band into the province during his stay.

The only records we have of both drama and music show little change in the quantity or quality of the arts which could be attributed directly to the arrival of Edward. There is little to indicate that he changed the already rather impressive schedule of public cultural activities. It is possible that there

were a number of private events which would bear out this reputation but no records exist to show it. The theatre in Halifax had a somewhat regular schedule from 1791. The season was an irregular one with an average of one or two changes of plays per month and one to three concerts per year.

The size of the orchestra at concerts and operas is never mentioned nor were records kept which would show the size or instrumentation of the service bands. It is possible that the "orchestra" mentioned on occasions was nothing more than the local regimental band which was present in Halifax to play for parades and other ceremonies.

We cannot determine the quality of the music presented in Halifax, but the records that remain show that at the turn of the century Halifax audiences could hear a growing number of concerts and operas. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, with only fifty years of history, Halifax could begin to take its place as one of the centres of culture in the New World.

NOTES

1. *Colonial Office Records*, M. G. 11, Nova Scotia Archives, Vol. 67.
2. *S. P. G. Letters*, B25, #4, #71, #116, Nova Scotia Archives.
3. *St. Paul's Church Records*, Vol. I.
4. *Nova Scotia Chronicle*, June 19, 1770; August 7, 1770.
5. *Royal Gazette*, May 26, 1789; February 3, 1795; January 1, 1793; September 28, 1790; January 25, 1791; July 5, 1791; July 19, 1791; January 2, 1792; January 15, 1793; March 29, 1796; April 1, 1799; September 9, 1794.
6. C. Haddy, *Looking Back over Two Centuries*.
7. *St. Matthew's Church Records*, Vol. 1.
8. *Halifax Gazette*, May 21, 1761.
9. *Nova Scotia Gazette*, December 18, 1787; February 22, 1785; September 16, 1788.
10. *Halifax Weekly Chronicle*, February 19, 1791.
11. *Diary of Simeon Perkins*, p. 141.
12. A. R. Jewitt, Early Halifax Theatres, *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 5, p. 444.