

**WILLIAM BILLINGS**  
**Wake Ev'ry Breath**

**New World Records 80539**

**Psalm-Tunes, Anthems, Canons, and Fuging-Tunes by William Billings**

For most of his professional life William Billings was America's most famous musician. He composed more than 340 works, taught singing-schools, wrote extensively in several literary forms, and had a singing voice that was called "stentorian." His friends included Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and other key figures of the American Revolution, and several of his anti-British tunes played an important role in it. Physically he was described as "somewhat deformed in person, blind with one eye, one leg shorter than the other, one arm somewhat withered . . ." with "a propensity for taking snuff that may seem almost incredible." In addition to his musical career, Billings worked at the tanner's trade in his own shop in the center of Boston, and he also held a number of municipal positions, including coal inspector, sealer of leather, police inspector, scavenger, trade inspector, and hog reeve (a minor official in charge of keeping stray swine off the streets). He was, in short, a remarkable man who wrote remarkable music.

Billings was born in Boston on October 7, 1746, at the tail end of the generation that brought about the American Revolution. While little is known of his early life, his father, William, was probably a shopkeeper, perhaps a tailor, who died when young William was 13 or 14. To help support his family, Billings left school and was apprenticed to a tanner. It was while attending New South, one of Boston's many Methodist churches, that Billings discovered his natural affinity for music. Here he heard the (mostly British) anthems and psalm- and hymn-tunes that would form the basis of his own compositions.

With little or no formal training, Billings began composing his own pieces, sometimes, it is said, writing them out with chalk on the walls of his tanner's shop as he worked. He soon had completed his first tunebook, *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, a collection of more than one hundred works, which he published at his own expense in 1770. In their fine biography of Billings, David McKay and Richard Crawford describe the work's importance:

It would be difficult to find another single publication in the history of American music—in the history of western music, for that matter—whose priority in its tradition is more conspicuous than that of Billings' collection . . . it appears that roughly a dozen American-composed psalm-tunes were published before 1770. Billings' *New-England Psalm-Singer* . . . increased that figure tenfold. It was the first published compilation of entirely American music: moreover, it was the first tunebook produced by a single American composer.

Early in his career, Billings learned that a way to promote his own music and psalm-singing in general was to teach singing-school. Usually sponsored by a church and meeting three times a week over several months, singing-schools taught young people the fundamentals of music, vocal production, and ensemble singing. Billings taught singing-schools throughout New England, and it was while conducting a school in Stoughton, Massachusetts, in 1774 that Billings met Lucy Swan, a young soprano. She would soon become his wife, and mother of their nine children.

In 1778 Billings published his second tunebook, *The Singing Master's Assistant*, which proved to be his most popular and helped establish him as the country's most prominent musician. This collection was issued in four editions, and its success helped Billings purchase a home as well as to become a pew-holder at Boston's prestigious Hollis Street Church. He would subsequently publish four more volumes during his life: *Music in Miniature*, *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement*, *The Suffolk Harmony*, and *The Continental Harmony*.

William Billings also had a genuine literary talent. In addition to supplying extensive introductions to each of his tunebooks, he wrote original texts for many of his compositions and often reworked Biblical passages for psalm-tunes or anthems. He also published a number of original works, or "pamphlets," of which one has survived, a lengthy fable from 1784 satirizing what Billings perceived as Puritan hypocrisy titled *The Porcupine, Alias the Hedge-Hog: or Fox Turned Preacher*.

His prosperity did not endure, however, and Billings' last years were marked by poverty, and the death of his wife in 1795. He was forced to take a number of minor municipal appointments and, at his death in 1800 was buried in an unmarked grave, perhaps in Boston Common. By this time, his music had fallen into disfavor, where it remained for much of the nineteenth century; it was often denounced as too unrefined by those who felt a more European style of music was needed. While many of his tunes have always been included in the Sacred Harp and other shape-note tunebooks, it was not until composers such as Henry Cowell, William Schuman, and John Cage rediscovered Billings that even a small part of the present-day musical establishment began to recognize his importance. With the recent publication of his complete works (the first such complete critical edition for an American composer) and ever-increasing performances, Billings' music will continue to gain the respect it deserves.

## The Compositions

William Billings composed in a number of different forms common in eighteenth-century church music. The following are much-condensed descriptions of each:

*Psalm-tunes* are verse paraphrases of the Biblical psalms in various meters (Common, Short, Long, etc.), while *hymn-tunes* are religious metrical verse not based on the psalms.

*Fuging-tunes* are psalm- or hymn-tunes with an added fugal section.

*Anthems* are extended settings of prose texts.

*Set-pieces* are extended works, similar to anthems, but using poetic texts.

*Canons* are works in which the melody, stated in one part, is imitated by other parts entering at different intervals.

The canon "Wake Ev'ry Breath" is the composition, engraved by Paul Revere, on the frontispiece to *The New-England Psalm-Singer* and the first piece printed in the tunebook.

In "Africa," like all of Billings psalm- and hymn-tunes, the lead melody is given to the tenor. Billings composed in such a way, however, that it is possible to create six parts by having some sopranos sing the tenor and some tenors the soprano (each in their own range), and this has been a common performance practice for his music.

Until recent years, the anthem "Mourn, Mourn" had been performed entirely in the minor mode, but musical research has now determined that Billings intended a change to C major with the section

beginning "Then will the Lord."

"I am the Rose of Sharon" was one of Billings' most popular works during his lifetime and remains so to this day. The text of the anthem is from the Song of Solomon.

Billings wrote, early in his career, that "in order to have good Music, there must be Three Bass to one of the upper Parts. So that for Instance, suppose a Company of Forty People, Twenty of them should sing the Bass, the other Twenty should be divided . . . into the upper Parts. [The Bass] if well sung together with the upper Parts, is most Majestic, and so exceeding Grand as to cause the Floor to tremble, as I myself have often experienced." (Billings himself sang bass.) For the tunes "New Boston," "Pembroke," and "Chesterfield," five basses were added to the chorus in keeping with Billings' ratio.

"Retrospect," "Chester" and "America" were three of several works written on the subject of the American Revolution. Because of his physical handicaps, Billings could not serve as a soldier in the army, but "Chester" became the most popular of all Revolutionary War tunes and a rallying cry for the Continental troops.

In the Book of Acts, Chapter 27, the name Euroclydon is given to the great northeast storm which caused the shipwreck of St. Paul on Malta in 60 A.D. The anthem's text is from Psalm 107:23-30, and Billings' music powerfully evokes the image of raging winds, churning waves, and reeling sailors.

"Creation" is a fugal-tune as well as a set-piece, while "Cobham" and "Jordan" are psalm tunes to words by Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the great English writer whose "Psalms of David Imitated" provided numerous texts for Billings and his contemporaries.

Though an early work, "As the Hart Panteth" already demonstrates Billings' remarkable ability to respond to the changing moods of a text. The anthem is a setting, with slight alterations, of Psalm 42:1-7.

—William McClelland

*William McClelland is a composer whose vocal and instrumental works have been presented throughout the country. As a pianist and singer he has performed a wide range of classical, popular, and contemporary American music. He is also an active environmentalist currently involved with a project to remove plastic bags and other debris caught in trees.*

#### *Wake Ev'ry Breath*

Wake ev'ry Breath, and ev'ry String,  
To bless the great Redeemer King,  
His Name thro' ev'ry Clime ador'd.  
Let Joy and Gratitude, and Love,  
Thro' all the Notes of Music rove;  
And Jesus sound on ev'ry Chord.

#### *Africa*

Now shall my inward joy arise,  
And burst into a Song;

Almighty Love inspires my Heart,  
And Pleasure tunes my Tongue.

God on his thirsty Sion-Hill  
Some Mercy-Drops has thrown,  
And solemn Oaths have bound his Love  
To show'r Salvation down.

Why do we then indulge our Fears,  
Suspicious and Complaints?  
Is he a God, and shall his Grace  
Grow weary of his Saints?

Can a kind Woman e'er forget  
The Infant of her Womb,  
And 'mongst a thousand tender Thoughts  
Her Suckling have no Room?

Yet, saith the Lord, should Nature change,  
and Mothers Monsters prove,  
Sion still dwells upon the Heart  
Of everlasting Love.

Deep on the Palms of both my Hands  
I have engrav'd her Name;  
My Hands shall raise her ruin'd Walls,  
And build her broken Frame.

*Mourn, Mourn*

Mourn, mourn, mourn, mourn, Pharaoh and Ahab prevail in our Land. Mourn, mourn, mourn, mourn, Achans abound and trouble the Land. Mourn, mourn, mourn, mourn, Darkness and Clouds of awful Shade hang pendant by a slender Thread, waiting Commission from God, the Upholder, to fall, fall, fall and distress us. Great God, avert th'impending Doom; We plead no Merit of our own; For Mercy, Lord, we cry. Bow down thine Ear to our Complaints, And hear from Heav'n, thou King of Saints; O let thine Aid be nigh. Then will the Lord be jealous for his Land, and pity his People, and say, "Behold, your Pharaohs and Achans and Ahabs are no more." Yea, the Lord will answer and say unto his People, "Behold, I will send you Corn, and Wine, and Oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith." Be glad then America, shout and rejoice. Fear not, O Land, be glad and rejoice. Hallelujah, praise the Lord.

*New Boston*

Ye boundless Realms of Joy,  
Exalt your Maker's Fame:  
His praise your Song employ  
Above the starry Frame:  
Your Voices raise,  
Ye Cherubim  
And Seraphim,

To sing his Praise.

Thou Moon that rul'st the Night,  
And Sun that guid'st the Day,  
Ye glitt'ring Stars of Light,  
To Him your Homage pay:  
His Praise declare,  
Ye Heav'ns above,  
And Clouds that move  
In liquid Air.

*Hingham*

Shall we go on to sin,  
Because thy Grace abounds,  
Or crucify the Lord again  
And open all his Wounds?

Forbid it, mighty God,  
Nor let it e'er be said,  
That we whose Sins are crucify'd,  
Should raise them from the Dead.

*I am the Rose of Sharon*

I am the Rose of Sharon and the Lilly of the Vallies. As the Lilly among the thorns, so is my Love among the Daughters. As the Appletree among the trees of the Wood, so is my Beloved among the Sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, And his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the Banqueting House, His Banner over me was Love. Stay me with Flagons, Comfort me with Apples, for I am sick of Love. I charge you, O ye Daughters of Jerusalem, by the Roes and by the Hinds of the Field, that you stir not up nor Awake my Love till he please. The voice of my Beloved, Behold, he cometh, Leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the Hills. My Beloved spake and said unto me: rise up, my Love, my fair one, and come away, for Lo, the Winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

*Retrospect*

Was not the Day dark and gloomy? The Enemy said, let us draw a line even from York to Canada. But praised be the Lord, the Snare is broken and we are escaped, but Blessed be the Lord, the Snare is broken and we are escaped. Hark, Hark, hear the Adjuration. Cursed be the man that keepeth back his sword. Oh! Dismal! Oh! Horrible! Oh! Dismal! My Bowels, I am pained at my very heart. My heart maketh a noise within me. For thou hast heard, O my Soul, the sound of the trumpet, the Alarm of War. See my Father, Behold my Brother, hear him groan, see him die. O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy Scabbard. Rest, rest, rest and be still. Cause us to hear with Joy thy Kind, forgiving Voice, that so the Bones, which thou hast broke, may with fresh strength rejoice. Hark, hark, hark, my Soul, catch the Sound, my Soul, catch the sound. Hear and rejoice. Beat your Swords into Plowshares and your Spears into Pruning Hooks, And learn War no more. How Beautiful upon the Mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that Publisheth Peace, Peace, Peace. Peace be on earth, good will towards men. Halleluiah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. Halleluiah, Amen.

*Chester*

Let tyrants shake their iron rod,  
And Slav'ry clank her galling chains,  
We fear them not, we trust in God,  
New-England's God for ever reigns.

Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton too,  
With Prescot and Cornwallis join'd,  
Together plot our Overthrow,  
In one Infernal league combin'd.

When God inspir'd us for the fight,  
Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc'd,  
Their Ships were Shatter'd in our sight,  
Or swiftly driven from our Coast.

The Foe comes on with haughty Stride;  
Our troops advance with martial noise,  
Their Vet'rans flee before our Youth,  
And Gen'ral's yield to beardless Boys.

*America*

To Thee the tuneful Anthem soars,  
To Thee, our Father's God, and our's;  
This Wilderness we chose our Seat:  
To Rights secur'd by Equal Laws,  
From Persecution's Iron Claws,  
We here have sought our calm Retreat.

See! how the Flocks of Jesus rise!  
See! how the Face of Paradise  
Blooms thro' the Thickets of the Wild!  
Here Liberty erects her Throne;  
Here Plenty pours her Treasures down;  
Peace smiles, as Heav'nly Cherubs mild.

Lord, guard thy Favours; Lord, extend  
Where farther Western Suns descend;  
Nor Southern Seas the Blessings bound;  
'Till Freedom lift her chearful Head,  
'Till pure Religion onward spread,  
And beaming, wrap the Globe around.

*Euroclydon*

They that go down to the Sea in Ships, and occupy their Business in great Waters; these Men see God's Wonders, his great and mighty Wonders in the Deep. For he commanded the stormy Winds to blow, and he lifted up the Waves thereof. They are mounted up as it were into Heav'n, and then

down, into the Deep; and their Souls melt away with Trouble. They reel and stagger, they stagger to and fro like a drunken Man, and are at their Wit's End. Then they cry unto God in their Trouble, and he bringeth them out of their Distresses. He maketh the Storm a Calm, so that the Waves are still. Then they are glad because they are quiet; and He bringeth the Vessel into Port. And all huzza, huzza, huzza. Their Friends assembl'd on the Wharf to welcome them on Shore. Welcome here again, welcome Home.

*Chesterfield*

Death may dissolve my Body now,  
And bear my Spirit home;  
Why do my Minutes move so slow,  
Nor my Salvation come?

With heav'nly Weapons I have fought  
The Battles of the Lord,  
Finish'd my Course, and kept the Faith,  
And wait the sure Reward.

*Creation*

When I with pleasing Wonder stand,  
And all my Frame survey,  
Lord 'tis thy Work, I own; thy Hand  
Thus built my humble Clay.

Our Life contains a thousand Springs,  
And dies, if one be gone:  
Strange! that a Harp, of thousand Strings,  
Should keep in Tune so long.

*Cobham*

Teach me the Measure of my Days,  
Thou Maker of my Frame;  
I would survey Life's narrow Space  
And learn how frail I am.

A Span is all that we can boast,  
An Inch or two of Time;  
Man is but Vanity and Dust,  
In all his Flow'r and Prime.

*Jordan*

There is a Land of pure Delight,  
Where Saints immortal reign;  
Infinite Day excludes the Night,  
And Pleasures banish Pain.

Sweet Fields beyond the swelling Flood,  
Stand dress'd in living Green:

So to the Jews old Canaan stood,  
While Jordan roll'd between.

There everlasting Spring abides,  
And never-with'ring Flow'rs;  
Death, like a narrow Sea, divides  
This heav'nly Land from ours.

But tim'rous Mortals start and shrink  
To cross this narrow Sea,  
And linger, shiv'ring on the Brink  
Through fear to launch away.

O could we make our Doubts remove,  
Those gloomy Doubts that rise,  
And see the Canaan that we love  
With unclouded Eyes.

Could we but climb where Moses stood,  
And view the Landscape o'er,  
Not Jordan's stream, nor Death's cold Flood,  
Should fright us from the Shore.

*As the Hart Panteth*

As the Hart panteth after the Waterbrooks, So panteth my Soul after Thee, O God. My Soul thirsteth for the Lord, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God. My Tears have been my Meat, Day and Night, while they say unto me where is now thy God? When I remember these Things, I pour out my Soul in me: For I had gone with the Multitude, I went with them into the House of God with the Voice of Joy and Praise, with a Multitude that keep Holyday. Why art thou cast down, O my Soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God for I shall yet praise Him for the Help of His Countenance. O my God, my Soul is cast down within me, Therefore will I remember Thee and from the Land of Jordan, and from the Hill of Mizar. Deep called unto Deep, all thy Waves and thy Billows are gone over me. Why art thou cast down, O my Soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God for I shall yet praise Him for the Light of His Countenance. Hallelujah, Amen, Hallelujah.

**William Appling Singers & Orchestra**

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Neil Farrell, tenor

Megan Friar, alto

Jonathan Goodman, tenor

R. J. Hazeltine-Shedd, bass

Elizabeth Henreckson-Farnum, soprano

Deborah Jamini, alto

Karen Krueger, alto

Gregory Purnhagen, bass

Walter Richardson, bass



Michael Steinberger, tenor  
Curtis Streetman, bass  
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David Bakamjian, cello  
Daniel Granados, clarinet  
Marco Granados, flute/piccolo  
Jennifer Leshnowar, violin  
Michiko Oshima, viola  
Muneko Otani, violin  
Bill Ruyle, percussion

Additional basses  
Reginald Hubbard  
Daniel Katz  
Jon Lowy  
William McClelland  
Claudio Rochat-Felix

The **William Appling Singers & Orchestra** is a select company of professional musicians performing choral works of all periods and styles, particularly the music of today's American composers. The ensemble has appeared at, among other venues, Alice Tully Hall, the Bard Music Festival, Severance Hall, and the Blossom Music Center, and has premiered works by many composers including Richard Hundley, Donald Erb, Hale Smith, and Richard Wilson. Founder and conductor William Appling has been acclaimed as "a remarkable choral conductor" (*The Nation*) and for his "decisive podium leadership" (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*), and the musicians have won praise for their exciting, sensitive performances, technical mastery, and sophisticated musicianship.

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- Early American Vocal Music: New England Anthems and Southern Folk Hymns*. The Western Wind. Elektra/Nonesuch 71276-4.
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- William Billings, The Continental Harmonist*. The Gregg Smith Singers. Premier Recordings, PRCD 1008.

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*WAKE EV'RY BREATH*

**WILLIAM BILLINGS (1746-1800) 80539-2**

**William Appling Singers & Orchestra**

**William Appling, conductor**

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This live recording was made on October 7, 1996, the 250th anniversary of William Billings' birth, at a concert given by the William Appling Singers & Orchestra at New York City's Christ & St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

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