

The Early American Songbook, Reclaimed

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Most ensembles like [Early Music New York](#) concentrate on European repertory from the medieval, Baroque and early Classical periods. Programs focusing on the American colonial and 19th-century eras, like the one Early Music offered on Saturday evening at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, are more unusual. In a program called “Christmas Quilt: Colonial Fuguing Tunes, Jigs and Reels,” a nine-voice male choir presented holiday songs from the American singing school and shape-note tradition. Shape notes were a form of notation developed in the early 1800s to teach congregations how to sing together. Fa, sol, la and mi, the four syllables in this system (still in use today), are assigned note-heads of different shapes.

“The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion,” first published in 1835 by William Walker (a.k.a. Singin’ Billy), was one of the earliest tune books to use the four-shape notation. It became the most popular such manual in the 19th century and was said to have sold 600,000 copies.

The program on Saturday included selections from “Southern Harmony,” like “Joy to the World” and “The Babe of Bethlehem.” The choir sang with buoyant pulse, crisp diction and a polished sound far removed from the ecstatic and raw style typical of shape-note singing.

The chorus also sang selections from late-18th-century publications like “The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement” and “The Singing Master’s Assistant,” both compiled by William Billings, a tanner by trade who composed “fuguing” tunes.

The songs were interspersed with vividly rendered instrumental interludes from John Playford’s “Dancing Master,” performed by the flutist Emily O’Brien, the cellist Benjamin Wolff, the violinist Marc Levine and the guitarist Charles Weaver.

Also in the lineup were excerpts from Daniel Read’s “American Singing Book,” Merit Woodruff’s “Devotional Harmony,” “Captain George Bush’s Notebook” and Samuel Holyoke’s “Harmonia Americana,” all given lively, expressively shaped readings.

The several encores included “Modern Music” from Billings’s “Psalm-Singer’s Amusement,” which opens with the line: “We are met for a concert of modern invention/To tickle the ear is our present intention.”

The next Early Music New York concert is on Dec. 19 at Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, 1047 Amsterdam Avenue, at 112th Street, Morningside Heights; (212) 280-0330, earlymusicny.org.

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