Secular Music in Reform and Dispersed-Harmonic Tunebooks, 1820-1850

Abstract
In nineteenth-century America, tunebooks—collections of hymnody and psalmody in settings suitable for amateur performance—served and reflected multiple facets of musical culture. Although their most obvious purpose was to offer music for use in the church service, such collections also figured in domestic music-making and provided repertoire for recreational singing societies. In addition, they served as pedagogical aids in singing schools, the predominant vehicle of music education at the opening of the century. These same singing schools furnished a growing number of Americans with the skills to pursue vocal music inside or outside of church. A constant demand for new tunebooks by this increasingly musically literate public had already fostered a lively native school of composition, including such figures as William Billings, Daniel Read, Supply Belcher, and Joseph Stone. The repertoire of these collections includes anthems and through-composed pieces along with psalm and hymn tunes of all descriptions: plain and florid, British and American. The majority of such pieces set sacred texts. Despite their relative scarcity, however, secular songs hold a distinctive role in the tunebook repertoire and can serve to elucidate the more fundamental issue of competing styles of part-writing. Examination of these atypical pieces offers a glimpse into a facet of tunebook culture currently afforded little attention.

During the time period encompassed by this study, two styles of part-writing dominated American hymnody: dispersed-harmonic and reform. Although proponents of both movements shared an interest in increasing musical literacy and improving standards of church-musical performance, the two had strikingly different ideologies and musical characteristics, as will be described below. Such dissimilarities persist in the area of secular music. Dispersed-harmonic compilers tend to take less prescriptive approaches to the subject, as evinced by the lack of a musically distinct secular style and the Christianization of secular pieces within the repertoire. This examination of twenty-seven tunebooks—encompassing reform, dispersed-harmonic, and mixed types—reveals differences in the two part-writing styles specific to the secular repertoire, while further clarifying the basic distinctions between the two.

Description
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Sacred Harp music represents one branch of an older tradition of American music that developed over the period 1770 to 1820 from roots in New England, with a significant, related development under the influence of “revival” services around the 1840s. This music was included in, and became profoundly associated with, books using the shape note style of notation popular in America in the 18th and early 19th centuries.[1]. The name is derived from The Sacred Harp, a ubiquitous and historically important tunebook printed in shape notes. The work was first published in 1844 and has reappeared in multiple editions ever since.