

Francis Hopkinson: The first American poet-composer and Our musical life in Colonial times

By Oscar G. Sonneck

An essay included in the program for "An Evening of Music of the Colonial Period" – Presented by the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania on November 12, 1919[†]

[If an author has found seven books insufficient to incorporate all his data on early American music, he cannot possibly give in a short address more than the barest outline of the complicated subject. Accordingly, the following remarks are merely intended as remarks of orientation for the Colonial Dames and their guests, assembled for the unique opportunity to listen in such a *milieu* to songs by Francis Hopkinson and to music by master of Colonial times played on the obsolete but fascinating and favorite instrument of that period.]

For all practical purposes the period before 1720 may here be disregarded in the history of music of Colonial times, and the period from 1720 to 1800 may be termed the formative period of our musical life in general. It was an imitation of musical life in England, except that the costly and exotic Italian virtuoso opera was not attempted. (The cultured musical life of the Moravians at Bethlehem, based on German conditions, while admired by travellers, had no influence on the rest of the country.) Then, as now, music in America had an international flavor. Musicians began to flock here from England, Germany, France, Italy as music teachers, members of the several concert and theatre orchestras, and soloists. Then, as now, the German musicians predominated in the orchestra, a supremacy which was not challenged until the French Revolution drove to our shores a host of musical refugees and gave to the programs a distinctly French flavor and to opera lovers a first but short taste of French opera, by Grétry, Monsigny, Rousseau and others, and of Italian *opera buffa*, as, for instance, Pergolesi's "La serva padrona."

Otherwise our operatic life was practically restricted to English opera. But this restriction was only in kind since hardly a single English opera by such writers as Arne, Arnold, Shield, Linley – the Victor Herberts of their time – was produced in England which did not find its way to America, and that with amazing speed, everything considered. Indeed, I remember the case of one of these London "hits" which was performed in America only half a year after its London première. Then, as now, our managers would travel back and forth to acquire the American rights for such successful novelties and to lure favorite opera stars to our country. The whole operatic life was based on the stock company system, and toward the end of the eighteenth century two companies, the Old American Company and the still more capable company of Wignell and Reinagle's Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, opened in

[†] See "Commentary" at the end of the essay.

1793, carried on a rivalry from which the public at large profited. If one remembers that New York and Philadelphia were in 1790 by far our two largest cities with a population of only 40,000 each, the statement that the Old American Company then had in its repertoire more than one hundred operas and musical pantomimes will impress you with its significance. Of course, that is a far cry from the first signs of operatic life in our country in 1735 (Charleston, S.C.) or 1732 (New York), but again consider that the repertoire consisted of such ballad operas as "Flora" and the famous "Beggar's Opera," that such were then the only English operas performed in England and that the prototype of them all, "The Beggar's Opera," was not produced until 1728.

A similar inference forces itself upon us, if we reflect that the first recorded public concerts took place in our country in 1731 at Boston and Charleston. Public concerts were a comparative novelty even in Europe. For instance, we know that they were not introduced in Vienna until 1728. The programs of our concerts were modeled after the concert programs in England. Plentiful instrumental solos and songs or airs from operas and oratorios would alternate with overtures, concerti grossi and symphonies. Vocally, Handel, of course, predominated. Instrumentally, as the century drew to its close, Haydn reigned supreme—Haydn the Richard Strauss of his time—surrounded by all the minor gods such as Pleyel, Stamitz, Pichl, in whom the musical world everywhere then delighted. Occasionally the orchestra season would comprise as many as eighteen subscription concerts, not counting benefit concerts for individual musicians. And these musicians often were really capable men, either as performers or composers of music in the style of the day. In our best orchestras there sat, for instance, men who had played under the great Haydn himself in London, and it surely was no mean complement to Alexander Reinagle, the foremost musician in America in those days, if Carl Philip Emanuel Bach requested his portrait for his collection of musical celebrities. Then, as now, the operatic stars would be engaged to enhance the public effectiveness of the program. Then, as now, they would prefer operatic arias to legitimate concert numbers, and in this manner our music lovers would become acquainted with the bravura arias from famous Italian operas, those of even Gluck included. That this development of our concert life did not take place over night goes without saying. Indeed, at first it was rather fitful, and the War for Independence seriously interfered with its progress, especially as the rather narrow-minded blue laws affected not only our operatic but also our concert life. All the more credit is due to such men as John Bentley in Philadelphia, who as early as 1783 and in the face of discouraging conditions, risked a series of twelve orchestra concerts, the so-called City Concerts.

Strange to say, in the field of choral music, the Colonial music lovers and musicians were not so successful in their imitation of English musical conditions. Nevertheless, time and again serious attempts were made to interest the public in the best oratorio music. For instance, William Tuckey, of New York, gave a very substantial selection from *The Messiah* in 1771, that is to say, at exactly the same time when Handel's masterpiece was first transplanted from England to Germany. Furthermore, I doubt whether even in Europe, outside of the famous musical centers, more ambitious choral concerts were often attempted than by Andrew Adgate, President of the ill-fated

Uranian Academy, of Philadelphia, who, in 1786, gave a festival with a chorus of two hundred and fifty voices and an orchestra of fifty men.

Of course, no amount of research could establish an equality of our musical life with that of London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin. Such an attempt would have need historical folly, but admittedly I did succeed in demonstrating that we had a fairly intelligent and vigorous musical life in Colonial times in the cities where previous historians might have looked for it, principally in Charleston, New York, Boston, Philadelphia. They, however, had their eyes on hamlets of a thousand inhabitants and everlastingly preached the doctrine that they found only feeble attempts at psalmody. To have destroyed that absurd historical sea-serpent tale, was at least something, and though after all if said and done, our Colonial musical life appears to call for the epithet "provincial," no sane person would expect more from an eighteenth century colony. To claim less, on the other hand, shows a most primitive appreciation and knowledge of the cultural tendencies and interest of your Colonial forebears. To this day, I am sorry to say, some of our general historians have not leaned their lesson, so far as the history of music in our country is concerned.

With this general outline of music in Colonial times I now proceed to a brief sketch of Francis Hopkinson's musical career.

Francis Hopkinson appears to have begun the study of his favorite instrument, the harpsichord, at the late age of seventeen, in 1754. Though therefore he probably never became a virtuoso on the instrument, he gained quite a reputation among Philadelphians as a performer, since Longacre many years after this death (in 1836), in his "National Portrait Gallery," remarked: "He was a musician of high grade in his performances of the harpsichord."

We do not know who his first teacher was, but we have every reason to believe that in the sixties he profited by the instruction of James Bremner, a capable Scotch musician. But even before Bremner's arrival Hopkinson was proficient enough to serve as harpsichordist at the surprisingly ambitious musical functions of the College of Philadelphia, of which he was the moving spirit during the years 1757-1768. It is probable that he took up the study of the organ simultaneously with that of the harpsichord. At any rate, he became skillful enough an organist to substitute for James Bremner at Christ Church in 1770 and for several years later.

Holding office as organist, he had ample opportunity to form ideas concerning the "proper conduct of organs in church." They are embodied in his miscellaneous "Essay and Occasional Writings" in form of a letter to Rev. White, the Rector of Christ Church, and show so much common sense and artistic spirit as to be of educational value even today. I do not hesitate to declare that little has been written on the subject in so few lines with superior lucidity and taste.

To form a correct idea of Hopkinson's knowledge of musical literature is today, of course, impossible. It was certainly not restricted to the narrow field of psalmody, with which he had to be familiar as organist, and which we know him to have taught the children of the United St. Peter and Christ Church congregations at least in 1764. Fortunately, the remnants of his fine musical library still in possession of his descendants, permit us to gauge his musical interests. Apparently they leaned strongly

toward the Italian masters of that period, but his taste was of the best, for he appears to have been particularly fond of such composers as Handel, Scarlatti, Stamitz, Vivaldi, Galuppi, Pugnani, Corelli, Guglielmi, Giardini, Geminiani. Substitute for these once modern of the moderns, names more familiar to you, like Brahms, Tschaikowsky, Franck, Rachmaninov, Elgar, Debussy, Wagner, Strauss, and it will at once become apparent that Francis Hopkinson was indeed a connoisseur of the music of his time.

Of course, he did not collect his entire musical library at Philadelphia. Very likely he purchased a number of works by his favorite masters while in England during the years 1766 and 1767. Unfortunately, the letters written to his mother from England contain only a few musical allusions, but fortunately one of them contains a passage that is very important. He mentions having met a Mr. Flanagan and he adds, "He used to come sometimes to my concerts."

This remark is the only positive clue to Francis Hopkinson's career as concert manager or performer. He may have referred to mere "musical-at-homes," but I doubt it. Certainly he did not refer to the performance of Arne's "Masque of Alfred the Great" at the College in January, 1757, at which he probably officiated as harpsichordist, and it cannot have been the public concert directed by John Palma in the same month, the first concert advertised in Philadelphia, though perhaps not the first actually given. Since there do not appear to have been other concerts worth mentioning between 1757 and 1764, I am inclined to believe that Francis Hopkinson was alluding to the fortnightly subscription concerts established in January, 1764.

These subscription concerts would best be classified as soirées of chamber music. The works played which called for the largest number of performers were the concerti grossi, concertos for several solo instruments with orchestra accompaniment. To play these not more than a dozen or so musicians were customary. And this number could easily have been recruited among the gentlemen-amateurs and professional musicians of Philadelphia. Indeed, that was the procedure not only in America but in England and on the European continent, therefore no proof of special primitiveness of Philadelphia.

Only a few years later the War for Independence broke out. Everywhere fiddle and harpsichord gave way to fife and drum. Our musical life, which not alone at Philadelphia, but at Boston, Charleston, New York and in cities of minor importance had steadily been developing, was crushed and remained more or less crippled for years after the war. Gradually, however, musical entertainments returned and multiplied at a surprising rate, but it lies not within the plan of the address to describe the musical surroundings in which Francis Hopkinson lived after the war.

A simple reason forbids this. His activity had been necessary, previous to the great struggle for independence to awaken and to keep awake the musical life at Philadelphia. *But now the days of the amateur musician had passed, the professional definitely took his place*, and the first golden age of music in Philadelphia, the period from 1790 to 1850, was fast approaching. Without doubt, Francis Hopkinson's love of music was as deep after as we know it to have been previous to the war, but his position had changed. It was less the musician Hopkinson than the music-lover who now influenced matters. We may rest assured that John Bentley, Raynor Taylor, Benjamin Carr, Alexander Reinagle, and other notable musicians were welcome at his house, received

from him all due encouragement for their ambitious musical enterprises, and that they in turn respected him as their most important forerunner, and well knew that without the foundations laid by James Bremner, Governor Penn, Joseph Gualdo and Francis Hopkinson their won position would have been uncertain and perilous.

Whereas Francis Hopkinson's career as gentleman-musician, harpsichordist, organist, concert-manager, psalmodist has more or less significance only for local history, his activity as a composer and as inventor of musical instruments assumes national, indeed international, importance.

Thought the piano-forte had been invented by Cristofori about 1720, it did not supersede the harpsichord in universal favor until about the time of Hopkinson's death. The harpsichord was constructed on the plectrum principle. That is, its tone was produced by plucking the strings, generally with crow-quills. While the harpsichord by virtue of its penetrating tone became the indispensable instrument for all ensemble and accompaniment purposes in Handel and Bach's time, it had this defect for solo purposes that the harpsichordist could not modify its tone dynamically by difference of touch, as was possible on the "piano-forte." Innumerable attempts were made to overcome this handicap by constructing harpsichords with contrivances to imitate the tones of the harp, the lute, bassoon, oboe, etc.—thus making of the harpsichord a miniature orchestra in itself. Other inventors limited their endeavors to improving the tone of the harpsichord without resorting to artificial means. Among the latter inventors was one whom historians have called "the last glory of the harpsichord" and unanimously they report that he was an Englishman by the name of Hopkinson, residing at Paris. To make a long and forgotten story short, I discovered that this Parisian Englishman, this "last glory of the harpsichord," was in reality an American, residing at Philadelphia—namely, Francis Hopkinson. There can be no doubt about this, since his discoveries which became known in Europe are embodied in the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society and elsewhere. His improvements of the harpsichord, while not wholly original, consisted, briefly, in this, that he substituted by ingenious means for the crow-quill first metal tongues, then leather quills and finally such of velvet cork. In passing, I mention also that he was the inventor of the "Bellarmonica" and one of those who successfully supplied a keyboard to Franklin's invention of the musical glasses.

And now finally and briefly to Francis Hopkinson, the first American poet-composer.

In January, 1757, there was performed at the College of Philadelphia a modified version of Thompson-Mallet's masque of "Alfred the Great" with Arne's music. Among the alterations there was a duet between two invisible spirits, and this was fitted, as the Pennsylvania Gazette reported, "to an excellent piece of new music by one of the performers." There can be no reasonable doubt that this performer and composer was Francis Hopkinson, but we historians, too, consider a man innocent until he is proven guilty, and so far as I know the absolute proof of Hopkinson's authorship is still lacking. Without such proof, we have to fall back on a collection of songs and anthems in Hopkinson's own hand (now in the Library of Congress). This collection was written in 1759 and 1760 and contains several songs and anthems by Francis Hopkinson

himself. The first of these, and clearly to be dated 1759, is the graceful, little song "My Days Have Been so Wondrous Free," unquestionably the earliest American song on record.¹

But again the historian hesitates to call Francis Hopkinson unqualifiedly the first American composer, for the reason that we know James Lyon to have composed an "Ode on Peace" for the commencement exercises at Princeton in September, 1759. Fortunately, Francis Hopkinson himself has come to our rescue. He knew James Lyon, knew moreover of him as a composer, and yet he claimed in 1788 in the dedication of his most important published work to George Washington, the excessively scarce "Seven Songs": "However small the reputation I shall derive from this work, I cannot, I believe, be refused the credit of being the first Native of the United States who has produced a musical composition."

From all we know of Francis Hopkinson's character, I doubt not that he investigated the correctness of his claim and found his earliest compositions to antedate those of James Lyon. To carry historical scruples too far serves no useful purpose, and so we may say that all available evidence points undeed to Francis Hopkinson as the first American composer.

It certainly does not point to William Billings, the Bostonian tanner and psalmodist, whose first publication, "The New England Psalm Singer," is dated 1770. However, until I published in 1904 and 1905 my researches on Francis Hopkinson's musical career, William Billings was so universally considered the American composer that funds were being collected to erect a monument to this, in his way, quite a remarkable man.²

Hopkinson's song of 1759, "My days have been so wondrous free" (to words by Doctor Parnell), and his other songs betray the period in which they were composed. Hundreds and hundreds of similar simple songs for the voice with harpsichord were produced by Hopkinson's contemporaries. It would therefore be erroneous to suppose that his settings for "Treble and Bass" reveal uncommonly primitive efforts. This was the style adopted for such pastoral songs by high and low in the kingdom of music about 1750, and the American composer falls short only in his rather stiff harmonization.

The songs and anthems in the manuscript collection of 1759-1760, the "Seven Songs" (really eight, since an eighth song was added during publication), the one printed in the *Columbian Magazine*, 1789, and the "Ode from Ossian's Poems" are practically all of Hopkinson's compositions that seem to have been preserved wither in

¹ This song, "The Garland," "My Generous Heart Disdains," and "Give Me Thy Heart as I give Mine," will be sung tonight as recently edited for modern use by Harold Vincent Milligan and published together with other Hopkinson songs in two albums by Arthur P. Schmidt, of Boston. The "Ode from Ossian's Poems" was specially edited for the occasion by Carl Deis and will be published by G. Schirmer, Inc., New York.

² Since there seems to have sprung up some confusion on the subject, I state that Francis Hopkinson's song, "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free," was first published by me in my essay on his musical career in the quarterly magazine (*Leipzig*) of the International Musical Society, 1904. This essay anticipated my book of 1905 on "Francis Hopkinson and James Lyon, Two Studies in Early American Music," where that song was again published (also in facsimile of the original manuscript). Thus, Mr. Milligan's recent edition, bibliographically speaking, constitutes the third and not the first publication of the earliest American song on record. However, lovers and students of Colonial music certainly are indebted to Mr. Milligan for having made published and unpublished songs by Francis Hopkinson easily accessible for modern use.

manuscript or in print. But they by no means represent his total "baggage," as the French say. It is a pity, for instance, that the music for the Dialogues and Odes which he composed for the Commencement Exercises of the College of Philadelphia, 1761, 1762, 1763, do not appear to be preserved, and especially must we deplore that loss of the score of "*The Temple of Minerva*, and Oratorical Entertainment performed in Nov., 1781, by a Company of Gentlemen and Ladies in the Hotel of the Minister of France in Presence of His Excellency General Washington and his Lady." The *dramatis personae* were: Minerva, her High Priest, the Genius of France, the Genius of America; and the whole entertainment consisted of two scenes with overture, trios, duet, air, chorus.

Whether "*The Temple of Minerva*" was a "dramatic cantata," performed, as was often done in those days, with scenery, but not really acted, or was a real miniature grand opera remains an open question. At any rate, however, Francis Hopkinson blossoms forth, in addition to all his other accomplishments, as either the first American cantata composer or as the first American opera composer.

Finally, we have to regret the loss of his manuscript of the once popular "*Washington's March*," attributed to him by contemporaries. Unfortunately, about half a dozen Washington Marches existed, and two of them were of about equal popularity, but which of the two Francis Hopkinson actually composed no amount of critical research enable me to decide.

Little remains to be said. As a composer, Francis Hopkinson did not improve audibly during the thirty years that separate his earliest from his last songs. His harmony is still faulty and "draggy" at times (making all due allowance for numerous engraver's errors), and he did not acquire an individual music profile. To claim classic beauty or high artistic value for his songs would mean to confuse the stand point of the critic with that of the antiquarian and patriot. But even the critic who does not care to explain and pardon esthetic shortcomings from a historical point of view will have to admit that Francis Hopkinson's songs do not lack grace, charm and expressiveness and that he obeyed the laws of musical declamation in English more carefully than a host of fashionable composers of that period. Stilistically, his songs are just as old-fashioned today as theirs, though perhaps less so. But why should we criticise at all our first musical compositions? It behooves us rather to look upon these primitive pioneer efforts as upon venerable documents of the innate love of the American people for the beauties of music, and as documents of the fact that among the "Signers" there was at least one who proved to be a "successful patron of Arts and Science," whose wish and prophecy that "others would be encouraged to venture on his path, yet untrodden in America" and that the Arts would "Take root and flourish amongst us" came gloriously true.

Commentary on the essay "Francis Hopkinson"

The essay above from 1919 is by noted American musicologist Oscar G. Sonneck for whom the Sonneck Society was named (now the Society for American Music). Not only is the essay informative for students on the subject of colonial-era music in America, but it also provides a glimpse of Sonneck's methods and writing. He also provides an excellent assessment of Hopkinson's songs as a rationale for encouraging the study of his music.

A few notes about the essay: Sonneck is clearly writing to present to a specific audience who have a keen interest in American history but possibly less of an awareness of musical history, and he states as much at the beginning of the essay. It is interesting that the context and background he provides for that audience will also assist current readers (e.g., the more familiar composers as a guide for the popularity of the composers Hopkinson was interested in). He devotes quite a bit of space to ascertaining "the first" among American composers. From today's vantage point and with a nod to more inclusive research, it should be apparent that there were many 'musics' operating during the colonial era, e.g., that of the Moravians who are mentioned by Sonneck but marginalized in terms of musical influence, or that of Native Americans who receive no mention in the essay. If it is understood that Sonneck's primary concern is music of the European classical tradition, then his methods and conclusions make sense. Our labeling of Hopkinson's song "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free" as the 'first American art song' should be understood in the same sense. Sonneck notes with regret two lost scores by Hopkinson, "Washington's March" and "The Temple of Minerva." A march by that title is included in the commemorative edition, "Music from the Days of George Washington," published in 1931 by the Library of Congress, but no composer is attributed, confirming Sonneck's stance that it was not possible to identify Hopkinson's march specifically. However, "The Temple of Minerva" has been reconstructed and was published as "America Independent, or The Temple of Minerva" by C.T. Wagner in 1978. The work is essentially a 'pasticcio' or 'pastiche,' - a popular form in Hopkinson's time that relied primarily on pre-existing songs set to new texts to portray an altogether different story. In the preface to the score, music historian Gillian Anderson also notes how the work was used as a parody to provide timely commentary on political developments leading up to the American Revolution!

Kathryn Woodard