

"The Indians Sung a Hymn in their Way": Brothertown Indian and Shape Note Singing

Afterword by A. Gabriel Kastle for Febr. 3, 2018 Commuck Singing program booklet

In breathing life back into Brothertown Indian singing, why involve today's shape note singers? Most simply because the traditions have already been complexly intertwined for centuries. Also, as in the experience of shape note singers, Brothertown hymnody has sung community into being, and nourished communities of travelling singers "of what Denomination soever, with cordial Hymns, to comfort [us] in [our] weary Pilgrimage," as Samson Occum (Mohegan/Brothertown) described in the Preface to his 1774 collection of hymns "in various Metres . . . for new Tunes and new Singers."

How Indian is Indian singing? "After sermon, the Indians Sung a Hymn in their Way," was Rev. Joseph Fish's comment on worship shared with great numbers of Narragansett, as set in his Diary for March 2, 1767. Also in the 1760s, it was reported of the Narragansett in Rhode Island that "on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evenings, they constantly meet together to sing and pray to God," led by their own preacher Samuel Niles (Narragansett). This Narragansett regularity of prayer and praise meetings with singing echoes Samson Occum's weekly worship pattern in the 1750s leading the Montaukett of eastern Long Island. The 1760s report on the Narragansett also shows that they were a center of inter-tribal worship, joining in communion with "Mohigon Indians, of which tribe the reverend Mr. Occum is one; . . . Pequot, . . . Nehantick, . . . Stony Town [Stonington Pequot] . . . and Montawk." This report appears in Charles Beatty's *Journal of a Two Months Tour* (London, 1768), which also shares a remarkable letter from a group of Lenni Lenape Indians still in New Jersey, written to others of their nation who had removed to lands west of the Alleghenies, in now-Ohio. The Lenni Lenape, served by Yale-trained ministers, Connecticut brothers David and John Brainerd, wrote in March of 1767: "Brothers, We have learned many good things, 'tis true, and should be very glad to see you, and talk with you, as brethren; and some of us might teach you to sing psalms, and to read and to write. . ." Here are Native Americans showing their English language and musical fluencies and offering to teach them to each other. Notably, all of this Indian singing was so well and widely established by the 1760s, before William Billings of Boston published in 1770 his first tunebook, so seminal for the shape note tradition streams!

Diverse writings attest to the vigorous hybrid features of Brothertown hymnody singing, with evidences of musical and English literacy and musical training (New England roots shared with today's shape noters) as well as orality and Indians teaching whole communities of each other in their way (Indianness). Singing in three or more harmony parts strongly suggests a trained, music-literate background. It is revealing then to follow the parts-harmony thread, as indigenized through intertribal community singing. After training including music literacy and singing in Eleazar Wheelock's missionary school, Native students Joseph Johnson (Mohegan/Brothertown organizer) and David and Jacob Fowler (Montaukett/Brothertown) travelled west to work. In the 1760s they gave regular, enthused, detailed

reports of teaching singing of "good many Tunes with all three parts" to Oneida students of multiple generations. Generations of Indians then taught each other, so that in 1827, Green Bay commissioner of Indian affairs Thomas McKenney heard the singing of a combined band of Oneida, Stockbridge, Munsee, and Brothertown. He wrote in educated detail that "They sang in three parts, base, tenor, and treble, and with a time so true, and with voices so sweet, as to add harmony even to nature itself." (variously sourced) On related themes, Occom quotes are findable in the *Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan* (2006 U Oxford P, ed. Joanna Brooks). In May of 1784, Samson Occum shepherded a group of extended family to their new homes in New York state, many of whom had never been Wheelock students. Describing this travel, Occom writes "I never did see the Dutch People [of NY] so pleased With any Indians they ever saw; the Indians that were there were all good Singers, in Psalms, Hymns and Anthems, and the People Would have them Sing every Evening." Even this seemingly simple description is revealing. The list of "Psalms, Hymns and Anthems" evokes later shape note tunebook title pages, and suggests an evangelical revival cultural style of Christianity, reaching beyond scriptural psalmody and into Dissenter/Separatist hymns of personal experience. Anthems have length and new music all the way through—not just repeated verses—and make little effect without many voice parts in turn and in harmony. Thus, inclusion of "anthems" implies learning from music books and the musical literacy of at least some in the group. However, noting them ALL as good singers suggests also that the Indians are teaching each other, maintaining traditional whole community participation. Together these details speak powerfully of a vibrant and sophisticated Native singing culture.

Other passages penned by Occom emphasize how Indians made hymnody their own and wove singing into their communal life. In October 1785, Occom and his Montaukett brother-in-law David Fowler travelled to David's new house on Oneida lands in western New York. Late on a dark, rainy night, Occom wrote, "as we approach'd the House I heard a Melodious Sin[g]ing, a number were together Sin[g]ing Psalms hymns and Spiritual Songs," showing that community gathers and sings—or, that singing gathers community—even without the leaders who are out in the rain! Tuesday 25, "Some of Onoydas Came in—In the evening Singers came in again, and they Sang till near ten O:C." More Indian community is built through singing. Wed. 26 "in the evening we had a little Singing again." Friday, "the Young Folks went in the evening to Abraham Simons a mile off[f] from David Fowlers to Sing." Wow! Then, Saturday Oct. 29, after rain, "David gatherd his Corn he had a number of Hands, . . . in the after noon he husked his Corn and the Huskers Sung Hymns Psalms and Spiritual Songs the big[g]est part of the Time, finished in the evening,—and after Supper the Singers Sung a while, and then dispersed—" Was that the first all-day sing and dinner-on-the-grounds?! In a 1791 letter, when Occom was living in New Stockbridge, on Oneida lands, NY, he mentioned the many weekly singing schools led by Mahican "Singing Master Jo Quinney." Here is a new generation of Indian teaching Indian in the intertribal patterns already noted in widespread 1750s and 1760s Native communities!

Quaker (Friend) writings are often rich in cultural details. For example, in 1801, Joseph Clark, Friend, visited Old Brothertown in New York. As *Friends' Miscellany*, vol. III, records, he arrived as a funeral ended, and wrote: "One of the Indians, named David Fowler appeared in supplication: after which, the whole assembly sung an hymn, in the English language, two lines of which were,

'Lord, make our souls ascend on high,
Where neither gold, nor pearls, can fly.' "

Whence this couplet? Does it represent Native hymnody creativity? Any other source for this text fragment would be informative, but has been elusive so far. Death is perhaps the only topic which challenges travel, sojourn, pilgrimage for popularity in shape note texts. Myriad Quaker treaty and council observations, as well as those of Indian Superintendent Sir William Johnson, remark upon the early time taken up by Indians in intercultural meetings in remembrance of those who had died within the last year. Is there some connection between this tradition and the Memorial Lessons of shape note singers? Following chains of tune and text publication is one thing, but what about the extra-musical parts of shape note singing tradition? The more I learn, the more Native they all seem to be. I see more hybridity, more Native American and European mutual influence.

Even the democratic format of shape note singings, with leaders alternating from among the singers, requesting tunes, choosing details in the manner of performing—all this resonates with observed Native singing practice as well. Who influenced whom? Consider C. Colton's remarkable report from his 1830s *Tour of the American Lakes*, describing worship at the early "Grande Kawkawlin" (in now Wisconsin) settlement:

I had always understood, that the Indians are good singers. It is an exercise, for which they have great fondness. But the half had not been told me. They seem *all* to be singers; and the mellowness and sweetness of their voices, together with the accuracy of their ear, and their horror of discord, ensure the sweetest harmonies in their chorus. This tribe have been so long practised in the art of sacred music, and their taste is so good in the selection of common tunes and anthems, that they are surprisingly familiar with the most extensive range of Christian psalmody. I heard about thirty of them last evening, male and female, sing an hour and a half without interruption, passing from one piece to another without repetition, except as requested;--all done in good style of performance, (when we compare the ordinary choirs of church singers, one with another) and in pure English; -- except occasionally, by particular desire expressed, they sung in their own tongue. . . . It seems impossible for Indians, when they sing in chorus, to avoid a simultaneous movement—which is never executed in churches of white people, where all the congregation unite;--and not always in choirs, that have had the best opportunities of being trained. This unerring exactitude of movement must be owing, I think, to a natural superiority in the quickness and nicety of their musical perceptions. I was compelled to award these Indians the palm over the ordinary performances of Christian psalmody, among the whites.

Now-familiar hybrid patterns are thus shown persisting in Native community singing through the generations and migrations! What a wonderful singing that must have been!

Rich hybrid details appear again a couple years later in Brothertown. In October-November 1836, a young W. W. Wright lived and worked in the Brothertown community along Lake Winnebago. He later

recollected details of his time there, which were printed in an 1894 newspaper article in *The Oshkosh Northwestern*. Wright wrote:

They were also great singers. Very often a party of them would gather at a neighbor's house and sing all the evening. When I was young they used, what was called, buckwheat notes. They carried all the parts the same as white people. I well remember one, Tom Cummock [Thomas Commuck!], who had a very heavy smooth bass voice. He could be heard plainly above twenty or more voices. . . . They had a church organization of Methodists with a membership of sixty or seventy. . . . The singing was a great feature in their services and they sang with might and main. They had no regular choir, but had a leader or starter (as they called him) Mr. Alon[z]o Dick, who was a very good singer and quite prominent man in the nation. The whole congregation would join in the singing, and it did seem as though they would raise the roof. . . . After the dismissal of the meeting and when a short distance from the church, small companies of them would begin singing camp-meeting hymns, and the woods would ring with their music.

Notice especially the use of "buckwheat notes," that is, shape note notation. The shapes, the singing in parts, and the duration of singing, all indicate the continued connection with music reading, shape notes in particular, even a decade before Commuck's music publication! In the other direction, connection between Brotherton Commuck and the southeast shape note mainstream is indicated by the pilfering of the tune MISSIONARY / WHITE PILGRIM from Commuck and its inclusion as THE LONE PILGRIM in later editions of *The Sacred Harp* and *The Southern Harmony* under the names of the compilers of those works! The appearance of Commuck's tunebook was not a random publishing event. Rather, his publication in shape notes is only the visible tip of a grand Brothertown Indian Nation community singing tradition spanning generations.

How then did Euro-scientistic music reformer Thomas Hastings gain a byline in Thomas Commuck's *Indian Melodies* (1845)? Hastings was "vehemently opposed to shape notes (he called them 'dunce notes')," wrote Warren Steel in *Makers of The Sacred Harp* (2012). What was Hastings' impact on the music as printed, and thus as it lands in our hands today? At present we can only make informed guesses, since all efforts so far have failed to turn up any relevant manuscript from Commuck's or Hastings' hands. We only know from consulting Hastings' 1845 diary that he handled the project somewhat extensively, for about five weeks, from Friday, April 18 ("Indian Melodies— unexpected job. Feel encouraged in this work at such a dull season. Thanks to kind Providence.") through Saturday, May 24 ("Finished the Indian melodies.") Comments between were similarly terse. Apr. 19: "Working at melodies to some good purpose." May 23: "Yesterday & today chiefly in my study arranging the Indian melodies."

I am not the only shape note singer to feel that perhaps Hastings over-handled Commuck's music, and under-served singers of parts other than the tenor or 'Lead' line, which is the most main melody. As an important example of one viewpoint on how Commuck's tunes and 1800s Brothertown style might be discerned despite Hastings, we of the programming committee are glad and grateful to have permission to include Wisconsin shape note singer James P. Page's musical (re-)arrangement of the tune WABASH. I

see this musical arrangement as a shrewdly intuited piece of a lost map, helping to find our way into a re-claiming of Commuck's and Brothertown's historical singing renown.

Moving forward, what will be the new tunes and who will be the new singers in the Indian way? My hope is that our gathered voices today and all their reverberations will help to inspire a new generation of Brothertown hymnody. It is not for me to prescribe the form that new tunes and new singers follow. Sacred Harpers often quote the prophet Jeremiah†, saying "Seek the old paths, and walk therein." Perhaps today's shape note singing in general will be embraced as it has been cultivated in continuous community practice outside of Native communities. Maybe Commuck's tunes will be re-claimed, as printed, or as re-modeled. Maybe indeed we will be graced with new tunes and new singers. Maybe again Indians will be teaching Indians, singing in community "in their Way." We would all be enriched—again—by such developments. Listen for these possible futures! Thanks for singing!

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† the actual KJV quote from Jer. 6:16 is "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein." However, as the epigraph of the 1971 Denson edition of *The Sacred Harp*, and as often spoken, it is as given above.