

LUTHER O. EMERSON: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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LUTHER O. EMERSON (1820-1915): A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Nineteenth-century Boston was a haven for composers both classical and popular in their orientation. One force which seems to have united and driven all of these composers was music's need to be understood and their need to educate the public. Into this scene L.O. Emerson emerged as a composer of all types of vocal music then taught in singing schools. Although today cast in the shadow of Lowell Mason, also from Boston and indeed Mason's follower in history, Emerson has never received the recognition that Mason did. And it is a deserved recognition. This paper points to Emerson's productivity in quantitative, qualitative, and analytical terms in a clarion call for promoting greater interest in nineteenth-century hymns, anthems, and songs in general and the life and work of L.O. Emerson in particular.

Luther Orlando Emerson was born in Parsonfield, Maine, August 3, 1820.¹ He was a member of the famous Emerson family; which had settled throughout New England. His home life was quite musical; in company with his four brothers and two sisters, Emerson played in the little orchestra and choir that his family on its own organized and enjoyed. It was this home musical life that cultivated Emerson's love for music. The church also

¹ The principal references for Emerson's biography in this paper are as follows: W.J. Baltzell, "L.O. Emerson An American Pioneer With A Study Of The Musical Convention And Its Educational Influence," The Musician, May 1909; [Obituary], "L.O. Emerson Dies Suddenly," Boston Transcript, 29 September 1915; E.S. Lorenz, "Dr. L.O. Emerson," The Choir Herald, January 1916.

offered some opportunities for the young Luther Emerson, as he played the string bass in the Sunday services.

Although Emerson had these childhood experiences with music, his formal music education came much later. The fact was that Luther's father wanted him to become a farmer and remain at home. He fulfilled his father's wishes until the spring of 1841; then he moved to Roxbury, Massachusetts, where he worked on a farm during the summer to earn money to attend Dracut Academy in the fall.

Ironically Emerson's first intention upon entering Dracut Academy, located in Boston, was to prepare himself for the medical profession not a musical career. But Boston offered many opportunities for hearing and participating in good music, thus renewing Luther Emerson's love and enthusiasm for music. With his musical interests revitalized, he entered a singing school held by Benjamin Franklin Baker. In the winter of 1842, Emerson attended another singing school held by a young George F. Root. But it was not until 1844 that he took his first formal music lesson from a famous teacher, composer, and organist in Boston, Isaac B. Woodbury.

On March 4, 1847 Emerson married Mary J. Grove of Boston who like himself was a writer of music.² After completing his education in Boston Emerson began his professional work by accepting a job in Salem as choirmaster in the Crombie Street

² [Obituary], "L.O. Emerson Dies Suddenly".

Church. In addition to his church job he also began to teach and conduct singing classes in nearby towns. During these Salem years, Emerson published his first collection of church music, The Romberg Collection. The collection did not succeed because the publisher had only a local reputation with a circulation to match. After eight years of faithful service in Salem, Emerson decided to move back to Boston.

Returned to Boston, Emerson took the position of organist and choirmaster at the Bullfinch Street Church, he remained there for four years. In 1856 Emerson published his first successful book with the Oliver Ditson Publishing Company, The Golden Wreath, which had a sale of forty thousand copies in its first year. The next year he tried his hand, successfully, at writing a Sabbath-School book called The Golden Harp. In 1860 Emerson wrote another church music book, Sabbath Harmony, which was also well received. But his next huge success did not come until 1863 when he published The Harp of Judah, a collection which sold fifty thousand copies in just the first year. This series of successful publications continued for many years, up until 1899. By that year Emerson had compiled seventy two collections of music for churches, singing schools, public schools, and conventions.³

In 1857 Emerson taught music in the Congregational Church in Greenfield and then moved on to teach at the Power's Institute at Benardston. These positions he held for seven years, a period

³ When compiling music for hymn and anthem books, it was commonplace for the compiler to include many of his own works as well as works of other contemporary composers.

during which his powers as a composer, teacher, and conductor were ripening, and he was unconsciously, perhaps, preparing for the larger field of work which he was to enter: the Musical Convention.⁴ Emerson dedicated most of the rest of his life to participating in and expanding the musical convention. Having directed over three hundred conventions, Emerson was in great demand as a convention leader.

Throughout his career Emerson was considered at his best as a composer and editor of books. During his lifetime he edited over three-score of them.⁵ Emerson's main objective in the later years of his musical career was to raise the standards of church music which he did through his continuous work in conventions, teaching, and his compiling. In Emerson's own words this labor to improve standards is most evident:

My life work has been in the interest of music for the people, and my great desire has been that my work should be educational and helpful in its influences. Church music with me has been a specialty, and my aim has been to elevate its standards, and to give to church choirs music of a devotional, uplifting character, and of that grade which the average choir could use to the best advantage.⁶

Reward to culminate these accumulated efforts and accomplishments came only when he had reached seniority. He received the

⁴ Baltzell, "L.O. Emerson", 204. The Musical Convention, as it was termed in the 19th century, was designed to bring music education to people in more rural areas. These people, who had no access to musical education could now attend these conventions, for a period of four or five days, and learn and practice their individual musical interest.

⁵ Lorenz, "Dr. L.O. Emerson", 63.

⁶ Baltzell, "L.O. Emerson", 238.

Doctor of Music degree, after many years of earning through service to an expanding musical community, in 1890 from Findlay College in Ohio.

In Emerson's later years he still remained active in music despite his eventual deafness and loss of sight. Finally, on September 29, 1915 Emerson died of pneumonia in his home located in Hyde Park. But Emerson's love for music did not die with him as there were five children, all of them interested in music, two daughters being in the professional ranks.⁷

This research of Emerson's repertoire was undertaken on hymn, anthem, and song books housed in the Captain John Smith Library and song sheets housed in the Christopher Newport University's American Music Archives. The library has sixteen music books either compiled or co-compiled by Emerson, the majority of which are anthem collections.⁸ The books that the library owns may be small in number compared to the whole of Emerson's work, but they are quite significant in that they consist largely of the more important compilations in terms of quantity sold and rarity. His first book, The Romberg Collection, for example is rare, due to its small circulation.

Emerson's principal publisher was the Oliver Ditson Publishing Company located in Boston. But his first publisher,

⁷ Baltzell, "L.O. Emerson", 239.

⁸ The total number of compilations completed by Emerson, in his lifetime is said to be seventy-two. (Baltzell, "L.O. Emerson", 204.)

for The Romberg Collection, was but a small time Salem publisher, Benjamin B. Mussey. Emerson had had difficulty in securing a publisher, but Mussey agreed to print this first collection on the condition that Emerson provide the plates for the printing.

The following table lists Emerson's work thus far studied or found in various secondary sources, as mentioned above. The table is sectioned by genres: first, hymns, anthems, and liturgical music, second, song books, third, pedagogical and children's books, and fourth, song sheets. Following these categories is a separate section for works found with no date indicated.

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WORKS BY EMERSON THUS FAR STUDIED OR LISTED
IN VARIOUS SOURCES⁹:

HYMNS, ANTHEMS, AND LITURGICAL BOOKS

<u>Copyright</u>	<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Title</u>
1853	B.B. Mussey	The Romberg Collection
1860	Oliver Ditson	The Golden Harp
1860	Oliver Ditson	The Sabbath Harmony
1863	Oliver Ditson	The Harp of Judah
1865	Oliver Ditson	Merry Chimes
1866	Oliver Ditson	Jubilate
1869	Oliver Ditson	The Choral Tribute
1871	Oliver Ditson	Emerson's Singing Schools
1872	Oliver Ditson	Standard
1873	Oliver Ditson	Episcopal Chants
1874	Oliver Ditson	Leader
1876	Oliver Ditson	Salutation
1878	Oliver Ditson	Onward
1879	Oliver Ditson	The Voice of Worship
1879	Oliver Ditson	Emerson's Anthem Book
1884	Oliver Ditson	Choral Worsh

⁹ These works listed are from both personal observation and/or lists in the following sources: Theodore Baker. Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians. New York: G. Schirmer, 1958, 437; Charles W. Hughes American Hymns Old and New. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, 382; Frank J. Metcalf. Stories of Hymn Tunes. New York: Abingdon Press, 1928, 224; W.S.B. Mathews. A Hundred Years of Music in America. New York: AMS Press, 1889, 88-90; H. Wiley Hitchcock, and Stanley Sadie. The New Groves Dictionary of American Music. London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1984, 45; as well as aforementioned references.

SONG BOOKS

1856	Oliver Ditson	The Golden Wreath
1874	Oliver Ditson	The Song Monarch (Co-compiled by H.R. Palmer)
1881	Oliver Ditson	The Male Voice Choir
1886	Oliver Ditson	The Royal Singer
1888	Oliver Ditson	Song Harmony
1891	Oliver Ditson	Victory of Song
1895	Oliver Ditson	Coronet of Song

PEDAGOGICAL / CHILDREN'S BOOKS

1872	Oliver Ditson	Method for Reed Organ
1873	Oliver Ditson	American School Reader
1887	Oliver Ditson	United Voices
1890	Oliver Ditson	Vocal Method

SONG SHEETS

1862	Oliver Ditson	"We Are Coming Father Abraham"
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WORKS FOUND WITH NO DATE INDICATED

---	-----	"A Nest Among The Graves" -song
---	Oliver Ditson	"Let Me Kiss Him For His Mother" -song
---	Oliver Ditson	The Chorus Wreath -Book
---	Oliver Ditson	Voice of Worship - Book
---	Oliver Ditson	Herald of Praise - Book
---	Oliver Ditson	"Negro Boatman's Song" - song
---	Oliver Ditson	"Out in the Cold" - song
---	Oliver Ditson	Piano Method - Pedagogical Book

Although Emerson did not write all the music within these compilations, he did include those of his own compositions "whose charm gave the books their vogue."¹⁰ Emerson also possessed the rare gift of arranging the music of other composers and simplifying difficult music so as to "get the chief effects and general impression."¹¹ For the remainder of this paper I concentrate on selected works which achieved immense popularity in the nineteenth century as deserving special attention.

In 1853 Emerson set out to try his hand in publishing his music for the public, the result of course was The Romberg Collection.¹² Although the book was not successful it did produce a memorable hymn tune, "Sessions". The tune was actually written in 1847 while Emerson was employed at the Crombie Street Church in Salem, Massachusetts. It was named after the pastor there, the Reverend Alexander A. Sessions. The work gained popularity throughout the years and was sometimes used in worship, even in place of "Old Hundredth" for the Doxology. An example of its later popularity was its performance at a Peace Jubilee as it was well received when sung by a chorus of ten thousand voices along with an orchestra of two hundred and a

¹⁰ Lorenz, "L.O. Emerson", 63.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Although The Romberg Collection was Emerson's first published work, his first effort in composing was a song called "A Nest Among the Graves" (words written by Mrs. Sigourney). [Obituary], "L.O. Emerson".

great pipe organ. It was said that the effect, irrespective of its magnitude at the jubilee, was "sublime beyond expression."¹³ The story behind its composition is quite interesting as told by Emerson himself:

One pleasant summer Sabbath day, after returning from church, being alone in my house, I took up my hymn book, and on opening it my eyes fell upon the hymn beginning, 'Sinner, O why so thoughtless grown?' My attention was at once fixed upon it. I read the whole hymn through several times, and the impression it made upon me grew stronger and stronger at each repetition. I had a longing to give expression in some way to my emotions. After a season of prayer I went to the piano, and at once played the tune just as it came to me. There was no hesitancy about it, no effort was made. I played it again and again, and felt at the time it had life-giving power, and would live.¹⁴

The hymn itself is in a basic four-part harmony format with the melody, interestingly enough, in the tenor. For the most part the work is typical of its genre, with its words in long meter (88.88), and has quite a pleasant tune also. But as seen in Example 1 Emerson has an unusual disposition of measures, 4,3,3,4.

¹³ J.H. Hall, Biography of Gospel Song and Hymn Writers. New York: AMS Press, 1914, 46.

¹⁴ Metcalf, Stories of Hymn Tunes, 173.

Example 1

SESSIONS. L. M.

Andinoso.

1. Sin-ner, oh why so thoughtless grown? Why in such dreadful haste to die?

2. Wilt thou despise e - tor-nal fate, Urged on by sin's delusive dreams?

3. Stay, sinner, on the gos-pel plains; And hear the Lord of life un-fold

4 3 4 3 4 3 4 7

Daring to leap to worlds unknown, Heedless a - gainst thy God to fly.

Mad-ly at-tempt th'in-fer - nal gate, And force thy pas - sage to the flames?

The glo-ries of his dy-ing pains! For-ev - er tell - ing, yet un - told!

4 4 5 4 3 4 7

Each verse is octasyllabic but the musical phrases for these words change from four measures to three measures. It was more typical in hymns to have a disposition of measures of 4,3,4,3 and to end with a three measure phrase. No other hymn thus far analyzed shows this particular measure disposition in fact. If such a curiosity makes a work popular, then "Sessions" would be understandably so.

In 1863 Emerson produced a book of tremendous success, Harp of Judah. This book helped Emerson gain the reputation as one of the most preeminent composers in church music.¹⁵ Perhaps the reason for the book's remarkable success is the anthem it contains, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah". This anthem is considered to be one of his finest compositions and showed him to be a leader in an original style of what Emerson's obituary terms "psalmody". The piece is a solo for either soprano or tenor with some choral accompaniment. It is one of the more difficult and longer works in the book.

The form of this work is especially interesting as it features an alternation between the soloist, with a written in accompaniment, and the chorus. Comparison with other works of this genre indicates that this form is typical. The anthem begins with thirty two measures of music for the soloist which alternate with the following twenty eight measures of music for the choir. The work goes to back to the soloist for sixteen

¹⁵ J. H. Hall, Biography of Gospel Song and Hymn Writers, 47.

measures and then back again to the choir for eight measures. The music thereupon proceeds to the soloist a last time for four measures and ends with four measures for the choir. This procedure sets up an alternation pattern in which the phrase lengths become progressively shorter: 32, 28, 16, 8, 4, 4. As a result, the punctuation of soloist and chorus is increasingly frequent. Indeed, the music's syntax uses more solo-choral punctuation than called for by either its words or its phrase structure.

This particular anthem has operatic overtones and was most likely inspired by opera. The operatic influences are clearly heard in the solo vocal line and the accompaniment. The music perhaps operatically expresses the text. As seen in Example 2 where the soloist sings the words "Feed me till I want no more," the music becomes quite repetitious to reflect this expressed wish.

Example 2



As seen in Example 3a the chorus's inner voices highlight the word "crystal" by a chromatic rise mirroring the chromatic rise of the accompaniment that introduces the anthem, seen in Example 3b.

Example 3

a.

Example 3a shows a musical score for a chorus. It consists of four staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, and the bottom two staves are piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The lyrics for the vocal parts are "O - pen now the orys - tal foun-tain, V". The music features a chromatic rise in the inner voices of the chorus highlighting the word "crystal".

b.

Example 3b shows a musical score for a piano introduction. It consists of three staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, and the bottom staff is piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The music features a chromatic rise in the inner voices of the chorus highlighting the word "crystal".

And in Example 4 the word "cloudy", in the chorus part, is exemplified through the use of moving notes that give the listener a suggestion of a full, majestic, and rising thunderhead.

Example 4

Let the fi - 'ry, cloud - y pil - lar,

Let the fi - 'ry, cloud - y pil - lar,

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with a rising line of notes under the word 'cloud'. The second staff is similar, also with a treble clef and one flat, and features a more complex, rising melodic line with many beamed eighth notes under the word 'cloud'. Both staves end with a double bar line.

In Example 5 the words "Land me" are highlighted by an ascending sixteenth-note line in the accompaniment.

Example 5

Bear me thro' the swell-ing current, Land me safe on Ca - naan's side,

Their steep and rapid rise to their resolution chord might express a confident homecoming after a tortuous, yet exciting journey. With this close connection between the words and the music, as shown in the foregoing examples, it is no wonder that "Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah" was so popular.

In 1862 President Lincoln issued a call for three hundred thousand volunteers to enlist in the Civil War. This event captured the nation's attention, especially some of its important writers and composers. An Abolitionist writer, James Sloan Gibbons, wrote a poem entitled, "We Are Coming Father Abraham, 300,000 More". Ironically William Cullent Bryant, another Abolitionist writer, mistakenly received the credit for the poem. Bryant went so far as to sign a denial of authorship of these verses that were thought to be his for so many years.¹⁶ Many of the wartime composers noticed that the words of this poem were quite rhythmical and could easily be put to music, among them were Emerson and Stephen Foster. In 1862 Oliver Ditson secured and despatched to Emerson the words of this famous poem with a message saying, "Set these words to music instantler."¹⁷ Emerson's setting of "We Are Coming Father Abraham" was a huge success and was said to be "resounding throughout the nation."¹⁸ Much of the song's success was due to its march-like sound and the great enthusiasm it evoked in the stirring war days of the 1860s.

¹⁶ John Tasker Howard. Our American Music. New York: Thomas Cromwell Company, 1931, 271.

¹⁷ [Obituary], "L.O. Emerson Dies Suddenly".

¹⁸ Ibid.

This piece has two halves: solo and refrain. As shown in Example 6, the solo leads into the refrain by slipping into the dominant at the words "Three hundred thousand more".

Example 6

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two systems. The first system is the solo, written in A major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It features a melody on a single staff with lyrics underneath. The second system is the refrain, written in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time. It features a melody on a single staff with lyrics underneath. The lyrics for both systems are: "fore - pour - door - fore - We are coming, Father Abraam & three hundred thousand more!". The solo system ends with a double bar line, and the refrain system begins with a new key signature of two sharps.

The solo part does this so as to prepare for the return to the tonic key of A major in the refrain on the words "We are coming, we are coming". The accompaniment is appropriately martial, sounding much like a drum beat.

This paper has dealt with a small fraction of the seventy two collections of Emerson. But in our researches we have isolated the best known among three categories of his works: hymns, anthems, and songs. And we have shown some of the facets of these works which undoubtedly contributed to their popularity. Even though Emerson was long-lived, as the brief biography has shown, his music was destined for posthumous obscurity. This was the case with so many other nineteenth century composers that have been allowed to be eclipsed by the more famous composers. But time's tide which has seen this unfortunate collapse of desired, and warranted interest can turn toward reviving that interest. And this paper is intended to be an impetus in an overdue Emerson revival.

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