

the interaction of African and European cultural patterns in black communities, with the resultant emergence of new, *African-American* patterns, there persisted among black folk musicians a predilection for certain performance practice, certain habits, certain musical instruments, and certain ways of shaping music to meet their needs in the new environment that had roots in the African experience.

CHAPTER 2

The Colonial Era

WHETHER they were gentlemen adventurers in Virginia, religious dissenters in New England, wealthy merchants in the Hudson Valley, or black and white indentured servants, the first settlers landing on the shores of the Atlantic seaboard were confronted with the tremendous task of clearing the "hideous and desolate wilderness" and building a place in which to live. During the first decades of the colonial experience, the cultural and social life of the people was necessarily that of a frontier community, and there was little time for the cultivation of the arts. To be sure, back in the countries from which they emigrated the settlers had participated in the musical life characteristic of the seventeenth century. The white settlers brought their psalm books to the New World and later imported musical instruments. The black folk brought their memories of the rich traditions of Africa. Together the settlers, black and white, were to lay the foundation for a phenomenal subsequent development of music in America.

MUSIC IN THE COLONIES

Colonial society in the seventeenth century was basically a rural society, and its music was primarily a vocal music, organized in relation to the needs of the meetinghouse (or church), the home, and the community. For the majority of the settlers the meetinghouse provided not only religious guidance but also social diversion. In the town it was the tavern or "ordinary" that served as the chief social institution for all classes of society—the "better sort,"

"the middling sort," and the "inferior classes." At the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, town dwellers constituted only about 8 percent of the population. In 1720, they were concentrated in Boston (with a population of 12,000), Newport (3,800), New York (7,000), Philadelphia (10,000), and Charles Town (3,500).¹

Undoubtedly it was the lack of organized recreational activities that stimulated so great an interest in dancing among the colonists, for dancing was the favorite form of social entertainment everywhere—from Boston in New England to Charles Town in the South—and with everyone, white settlers and black. The favorite instrument for dance music was the violin, played by white and black fiddlers. Except for the fife, trumpet, and drum music of the militia, dance music was the chief type of instrumental music performed in the colonies during the early years.

Vocal music remained dominant throughout most of the eighteenth century. The rapidly developing cities, however, soon began to stimulate the production of a wider variety of music, a music for the "concert room" and the "ballroom" as well as for the meetinghouse and the tavern. It became evident, as Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1743, that the "first drudgery of settling new colonies, which confines the attention of people to mere necessities," was just about over and that there were many people "in every province in circumstances that set them at ease."² The colonists could afford to cultivate the fine arts. They purchased instruments for use in their homes: "vials" (viols) of all sizes, the more popular violins, virginals (small harpsichords), "hautboys" (oboes), "guitars," flutes, "fortepianos," and "harmonicas" (mechanically controlled musical glasses invented by Benjamin Franklin). In 1714 the first permanent church organ, the "Brattle organ," was installed in King's Chapel in Boston. In 1729 the first public concert held in the colonies took place in Boston, a "Concert of Musick on Sundry Instruments."

Charles Town (later, Charleston), the cultural metropolis of the South, was regarded by some as the musical center of the entire eastern seaboard during the early eighteenth century. Certainly it was the port of entry for most professionals coming from England to perform or teach music in the colonies. It was there that the first performance of an opera in the colonies took place, in 1735, the one-act ballad *Flora: Or Hob in the Well*. As early as 1735 musicians of Charles Town were giving public concerts in honor of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, and in 1762 they orga-

nized the first colonial group devoted exclusively to music, the St. Cecilia Society.

Music schools and dancing schools sprang up in the towns, and in the rural areas itinerant music and dancing masters provided instruction, particularly south of the Delaware River, where the plantation was the chief unit of settlement. The musicians of colonial America came from all classes: there were professional emigrants from Europe, native professionals, "gentlemen amateurs" and amateurs among the lower classes, and musician-domestics—both indentured servants and slaves, both black and white.

PRIMARY SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Understandably, the black inhabitants of colonial America left few written records of their cultural activities. After recovering from the initial shock of being uprooted from their ancestral homes and forcibly integrated into an alien society, they had to learn to adjust—first, to the traumatic experience of slavery itself, then to the master group's language, culture, and way of life. Invariably black men and women had to do these things without help. Indeed, most frequently there was strong opposition to their acquiring any knowledge or skill that did not relate directly to their value as servants. In order to piece together the history of the black musician we must turn to documents of the dominant society—to their colonial newspapers, town and court records, legislative journals, and to the various diaries, letters, personal narratives, missionary reports, travel journals, and fiction of white colonists and travelers to the New World.

The Colonial Newspaper

The colonial newspaper provides a rich source of information about slave musicians.³ From the beginning, the advertising columns in newspapers (the *Boston News-Letter*, established in 1704, was the first permanent one) regularly carried listings of slaves "for sale" or "for hire." Numerous listings included references to the possession of musical skills by slaves, for their market value was thereby greatly increased. In March, 1766, for example, the *Virginia Gazette* advertised:

TO BE SOLD. A young healthy Negro fellow who has been used to wait on a Gentlemen and plays extremely well on the French horn.

On August 6, 1767, a prospective slave buyer reading the *Virginia Gazette* was offered yet a bigger bargain:

³See further in Lathan N. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements. A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*. 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983). This collection contains 6,000 advertisements collected from twenty-one colonial newspapers.

¹See further in Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (New York, 1939), p. 143. Estimates are that Boston had about 2,000 blacks, and New York, over 1,600 (p. 220). By the 1750s blacks comprised approximately 8 percent of the population in Boston, 14 percent in New York, 20 percent in Newport, and more than half of Charleston's population. See also Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt* (New York, 1955), pp. 88, 285, 333; Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York, 1942), pp. 84, 87, 338.

²Quoted in James Truslow Adams, *A History of American Life* (New York, 1927), v. 3: *Provincial Society, 1690–1763*, frontispiece.

TO BE SOLD a valuable young handsome Negro Fellow about 18 or 20 years of age; has every qualification of a genteel and sensible servant and has been in many different parts of the world. . . . He . . . plays on the French horn. . . . He lately came from London, and has with him two suits of new clothes, and his French horn, which the purchaser may have with him.

Judging from the evidence, slave musicians most frequently were fiddlers. Numerous examples, such as the following one from the *New York Gazette-Post-Boy*, can be cited to illustrate this:

TO BE SOLD. A Negro Indian Man slave, about forty years of age, well known in town, being a fiddler. [June 21, 1748]

Similar advertisements appeared in other newspapers of the time:

. . . he plays remarkably well on the violin.
 . . . a Virginia-born Negro . . . can play upon the violin.
 . . . a Negro Man slave, about 38 years old . . . can read and play on the Fiddle.

"Runaway" listings invariably gave more information about slaves than did "for sale" advertisements. The slaveholders omitted no details of personal appearance or habits that would help to identify the fugitives; for example, the clothing worn (generally made of "Negro cloth"), the color of the skin (ranging from black to "whitish"), the tools or other articles taken away (sometimes a gun), and the presence of identifying marks on the body (frequently the owner's initials branded on the cheeks). The possession of musical skills was considered to be noteworthy, as the following examples indicate:

RUN AWAY . . . a Negro Man about 46 years of age . . . plays on the Violin and is a Sawyer. [Virginia Gazette, April 24, 1746]

RUN AWAY . . . a likely Negro Man named Damon . . . was born in the West Indies, beats the drum tolerably well, which he is very fond of. [Virginia Gazette, April 17, 1766]

CAESAR: Absented himself from my Plantation . . . plays well on the French horn. [South Carolina Gazette, April 19, 1770]

A slave fugitive of Poughkeepsie, New York, could play two instruments:

RUN AWAY: Negro man named Zack . . . speaks good English, plays on the fife and German flute, had a fife with him. [Poughkeepsie Journal, 1791]

A South Carolinian could whistle and also fiddle:

RUN AWAY: Dick, a mulatto fellow . . . a remarkable whistler and plays on the Violin. [South Carolina Gazette, June 4, 1772]

Were the matter not so grim, one might be inclined to smile at the phrasing of some of the listings:

RUN AWAY . . . a Negro Man named Derby, about 25 years of age, a slim black Fellow, and plays on the Fiddle with his Left Hand, which he took with him. [Virginia Gazette, May 14, 1771]

RUN AWAY: a Negro fellow named Peter, about 44 years of age . . . he carried away a fiddle, which he is much delighted in when he gets any strong drink. [Virginia Gazette, May 4, 1769]

RUN AWAY: a Mulatto fellow named John Jones, about 26 years old . . . is a mighty singer. [Maryland Gazette, April 14, 1745]

RUN AWAY: Negro man named Robert . . . speaks good English, is a fiddler and took his fiddle with him. [New York Packet & American Advertiser, September 2, 1779]

Of a girl it was related that she was "fond of Liquor and apt to sing indecent and Sailors' songs" when intoxicated. Other examples, too numerous to cite here, could be drawn from colonial newspapers attesting to the prevalence of musical abilities among the slaves. In the *Virginia Gazette* alone, the advertisement sections contained more than sixty references to black musicians during the years 1736–80, forty-five of which were to black violinists or fiddlers. It is noteworthy that some references were made to fiddle *makers*, as distinguished from performers:

RUN AWAY . . . a black Virginia born Negro fellow named Sambo, about 6 ft. high, about 32 years old. He makes fiddles, and can play upon the fiddle, and work at the carpenter's trade. [August 18, 1768]

Other Primary Sources

Other sources of information are the town and court records and the assembly journals of the time, which frequently reveal items of musical interest among the dry lists of facts. Thus we learn, for example, that the slave Nero Benson served as a trumpeter in the company of Captain Isaac Clark in 1723 in Framingham, Massachusetts.⁴ The trial records of the New York City slave revolt in 1741 show that one of the slaves involved was a fiddler: a man named Jamaica, a slave of Ellis, who was "frequently at Hughson's [tavern] with his fiddle."⁵ On October 5, 1765, the two young drummers who marched through the streets of Philadelphia beating "crepe-festooned" drums to call the citizenry to a town meeting on the State House grounds were black boys.⁶

Most informative of all, of course, are the various kinds of personal writing, nonfiction and fiction, that have come down from the colonial period. Travelers who remarked on a slave's singing or instrumental playing, local historians who cited the names of black musicians in villages and

⁴In regard to Benson, see William Barry, *History of Framingham, Massachusetts, from 1640 to the Present Time* (Boston, 1847), p. 157.

⁵Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, 1951), p. 4.

⁶See Harold D. Eberlin and Cortlandt van Dyke Hubbard, *Diary of Independence Hall* (New York, 1900), p. 100.

towns or described slave festivals, diarists who jotted down notes about their musically inclined servants, novelists who recreated scenes of slave merrymaking—all represent valuable sources of information about the musical activities of black colonists.

Of the writings of New Englanders, the most useful is the diary kept over a span of fifty-five years (1674–1729) by the Puritan judge Samuel Sewall of Boston.⁷ Sewall was very fond of music and, moreover, was the precentor (or deacon) in his church, one of his duties being to lead congregational singing. Because of his talent he was frequently called upon to lead group singing on the many and varied occasions in the Puritan way of life that called for psalm singing: religious services on weekdays, weddings, funerals, meetings of the town council, holiday celebrations, and social gatherings in the home. Sewall's diary is of value, then, for two reasons: it throws light on musical practices of his time; and it reveals the extent to which black people participated in community life. Consequently, we learn indirectly from Sewall about the musical activities of the blacks.

In regard to musical practices in the South, the letters and reports of clergymen who worked among the slaves as missionaries are particularly revealing. In addition to filing official documents with their supervisors, the missionaries wrote to their benefactors in England for various kinds of supplies. Some of the letters were published in contemporary books, such as the *Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies and Others; Shewing the State of Religion in Virginia, S.C., &c Particularly Among the Negroes* (London, 1761) and Benjamin Fawcett, *A Compassionate Address* (London, 1755).

The South also had its celebrated diarists, among them, William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, and Philip Vickers Fithian. Although these diaries were not as extensive as Sewall's, they offer lively descriptions of the southern way of life for the aristocracy and their indentured servants, black and white.

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING: PSALMODY AND HYMNODY

Singing in the Meetinghouse

In New England, where Sabbath services were held mornings and evenings, African Americans joined in the singing from the special pews where they sat separately from the whites (sometimes the pews were marked "BW" for black women and "BM" for black men). Along with other members of the congregation they waited for the precentor to "line out" the

psalm and "set the tune" according to traditional procedures. The Reverend John Cotton provided explicit instructions in a treatise of 1647:

it will be a necessary helpe, that the lines of the Psalme, be openly read before-hand, line after line, or two lines together, that so they who want either books or skill to reade, may know what is to be sung, and joyne with the rest in the dutie of singing.⁸

In the colony of New York it was the Dutch Reformed Church that ordered, in a church law of 1645, the precentor or *voorzanger* to "tune the psalm" for congregational singing. The procedure consisted in the precentor's chanting one line (or two lines) at a time, ending on a definite pitch, and the congregation following with the singing of the same line, generally with some elaboration of the tune. (This practice, called "lining out," later became a characteristic feature of hymn singing in black churches and still lingers on in many places.) It was the precentor's responsibility not only to start the psalm tune on the right pitch, but also to sing loudly and clearly enough to lead the congregation in the singing.

People learned to sing psalm tunes by rote, in the same way they learned folksongs, and inevitably they altered the tunes a little each time they sang. The most popular of the early psalters, called the *Bay Psalm Book*, contained no music in its first edition (1640) but suggested the names of appropriate tunes to which the psalm texts could be fitted. This psalter was the first book printed in the English colonies. A 1698 edition of the psalter included thirteen tunes: *Oxford*, *Litchfield*, *Low Dutch*, *York*, *Windsor*, *Cambridge Short*, *St. David's*, *Martyrs*, *Hackney*, *119th Psalm*, *100th Psalm*, *115th Psalm*, and *148th Psalm*. Any psalm could be sung to a variety of tunes, the choice being restricted by the need to match the metrical system of psalm and tune.

A comparison of the King James version of Psalm 19:1–6 (a) with the metrical version of the same psalm as it appeared in the *Bay Psalm Book* (b) illustrates the difference between the two:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| (a) | The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
Day unto day uttereth speech,
and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
There is no speech nor language,
where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.
His going forth is from the end of the heaven, |
|-----|---|

⁷Sewall's diary has been published in several editions; among them, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Fifth Series, vols. 5–7 (Boston, 1878–82). Dates are given for quotations rather than page numbers so that any edition of the diary can be consulted for further information.

⁸Quoted in Gilbert Chase, *America's Music*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York, 1966), p. 31.

and his circuit unto the ends of it:
and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.

- (b) The heavens doe declare
the majesty of God:
also the firmament shews forth
his handy-work abroad.
Day speaks to day, knowledge
night hath to night declar'd.
There neither speach nor language is,
where their voyce is not heard.
Through all the earth their line
is gone forth, & unto
the utmost end of all the world,
their speaches reach also:
A Tabernacle hee
in them pitch for the Sun.
Who Bridegroom like from's chamber goes
glad Giants-race to run.
From heavens utmost end,
his course and compassing;
to ends of it, & from the heat
thereof is hid nothing.

A favorite tune used for the singing of Psalm 19 was the *Cambridge Short Tune*. Since it has the same metrical scheme as the psalm text—that is, short meter—each syllable of the psalm text can be matched by a note in the melody.

Cambridge Short Tune



The small repertory of melodies in general use increased the probability of most members of the community being willing and able to learn to sing psalms, whether or not they could read or had access to psalters. In contemporary psalters and hymnals the meters most often applied to singing the

psalms are long meter (8.8.8.8), common meter (8.6.8.6), and short meter (6.6.8.6). Among the other psalm collections (some of them containing tunes) available to the early settlers were Thomas Ravenscroft's *Whole Booke of Psalmes*, the popular Ainsworth Psalter (mentioned by Longfellow in *The Courtship of Miles Standish*), the Sternhold and Hopkins, the Tate and Brady, and the Allison Psalters.

Psalm Singing in the Community

We know from contemporaneous sources that the singing of psalms was not confined to the meetinghouse. In many places in the North, when a colonial family gathered for prayer services in the home, the "light of the blazing fire glowed on the dark shining faces intermixed familiarly with the master's children." Black servants sang with their masters on special occasions, as on October 3, 1688, at Sewall's house: "Have a Day of Prayer at our House: . . . Sung *Cambridge Short Tune*, which I set"; and at weekly prayer meetings, such as the one held at Sewall's house on January 1, 1718: "Privat Meeting at our House . . . Sung clauses out of the 143rd Psalm."

Psalm singing was essential at a wedding ceremony or at funeral service. Sewall took personal charge of the wedding of "Mr. John Wait's Bastian and Mrs. Thair's Negro Jane" in January 1701. Although Sewall did not describe this wedding, his descriptions of others in his diary offer insight into common practices among the household servants. After the brief ceremony held in the "Hall" of his house, Sewall would have set the psalm tune—perhaps *York* or *Low Dutch*—"in a very good key, which made the singing with a good number of voices very agreeable." For wedding refreshments "cake and sack-posset" would have been served.

When the community gathered for public ceremonies such as the King's Birthday or Election Day, psalm singing was again in order. Sewall described a typical ceremony that took place on May 20, 1691: "Election Day [was] very fair and comfortable weather. Led the South Company into the Common, there prayed with them. . . . The 122nd Psalm was sung. Mr. Allen got me to set the Tune, which was *Windsor*."

The singing of psalms by the colonists, black and white, was not confined to formal occasions. Like their contemporaries in Europe, they believed that:

The first and chief Use of Musick is for the Service and Praise of God, whose gift it is. The second Use is for the Solace of Men, which as it is agreeable unto Nature, so it is allow'd by God, as a temporal Blessing to recreate and cheer men after long study and weary labor in their Vocations.⁹

When black colonists began to organize their own meetings, it was natural that they should include the singing of psalms. The earliest of these orga-

⁹John Playford, *Brief Introduction to the Skill of Musick* (London, 1687), p. 3.

nizations, the Society of Negroes, was formed in October 1693, when a group of servants went to Puritan minister Cotton Mather for help in forming a "Meeting for ye Welfare of [those] . . . that were Servants." The Society drew up nine rules for its governance, of which the first stated:

It shall be our Endeavour to Meet in the Evening after the Sabbath [service]; and Pray together by Turns, one to begin and another to conclude the Meeting; And between the two *Prayers*, a Psalm shall be Sung and a *Sermon* repeated.¹⁰

The Reform Movement

The traditional way of singing psalms, without recourse to musical notation and without the aid of instrumental accompaniment, inevitably led to the development of undesirable practices with regard to congregational singing. People forgot the psalm tunes or changed the tunes slightly as they sang. Had there been instrumental accompaniment for the singing, it would have sufficed to keep the congregation on pitch, but the use of instruments in the meetinghouse was frowned upon in most places (but not among the Anglicans) and absolutely forbidden in Reformed Puritan churches. The precentor could not always be depended upon to provide good leadership; sometimes he himself forgot the tune, or set the pitch too high, or embellished the melody so freely that the singers following his leadership became confused.

Deacon Sewall, for example, experienced several embarrassing moments during his years as leader of congregational singing. The black worshipers in attendance at church on those occasions contributed as much to the confusion, no doubt, as did the white worshipers. On October 25, 1691, Sewall wrote:

Capt. Frary's voice failing him in his own Essay, he calls to me to set the Tune, which accordingly I doe. . . . The Tune I guess'd at was in so high a Key that I could not reach it.

On December 28, 1705, Sewall again realized that he himself was to blame:

[He] Spake to me to set the Tune. I intended *Windsor* and fell into *High Dutch*, and then essaying to set another Tune went into a Key much too high. So I pray'd Mr. White to set it; which he did well, *Litchfield Tune*. The Lord humble me and Instruct me, that I should be the occasion of any Interruption in the Worship of God.

Years later, Sewall was still having difficulties, as on February 2, 1718:

In the morning I set *York Tune* and in the 2^d going over, the gallery carried it irresistibly to St. David's which discouraged me very much.

¹⁰Mather entered eight of the rules in his diary for 1693; the ninth was printed later when the full document was printed as a broadside sheet. Reprint in *Massachusetts Broad-sides, Ballads, Etc. Printed in Massachusetts 1639-1800* (Boston, 1922), p. 29, no. 201.

On February 23, 1718, the very same thing happened again.

The occurrences in Sewall's church were not unusual; similar ones were taking place in churches all over the land. Some learned clergymen began to agitate for the improvement of psalm singing in the church, making such allegations as:

Tunes are now miserably tortured, and twisted, and quavered in some Churches, into an horrid Medley of confused and discordant Noises . . . and besides no two men in the Congregation quavering alike, or together, which sounds in the Ears of a Good Judge like five hundred different tunes roared out at the Same Time.

or:

the same person who sets the Tune and guides the Congregation in Singing, commonly reads the Psalm, which is a task so few are capable of performing well, that in Singing two or three staves the Congregation falls from a cheerful Pitch to downright Grumbling. . . .¹¹

By the 1720s a movement was definitely under way to improve the quality of congregational singing.

The conventional approach to the singing of the psalms, called the "common way," was "grave and serious." Tunes were sung in a very slow tempo with much ornamentation of the melodic lines. The reformers wanted to replace the old style with a new one, called "regular singing," which emphasized singing by rules, in a strict tempo, and with exact pitches. The ordinary people clung to their old ways for as long as they could, for they liked the slow melodies with flourishes and shakes on the notes, but the reformers eventually won out. Singing schools, and later singing societies, were organized where people could receive instruction in "correct singing"—that is, could learn to sing the psalm tunes as written. Organs were brought into the church to accompany the congregational singing and to keep the singing on pitch. Trained singers were organized into church choirs that took over the responsibility for performing difficult religious music—for example, the anthems—and leading the congregation in its singing. Psalters and hymnals containing tunes were gradually used more and more, so that people could follow the music as they sang.

The Growth of Hymnody

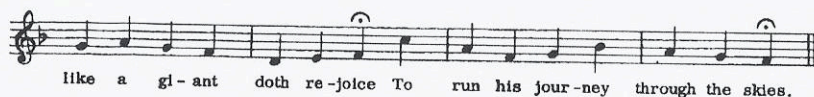
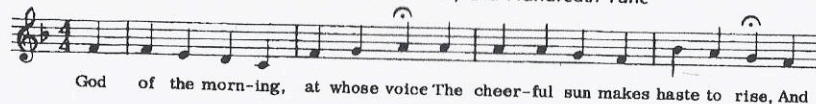
During the 1730s a religious movement called the "Great Awakening" swept the colonies, bringing with it a demand for the use of livelier music in the worship service. The "new" songs of the movement were *hymns*; for texts they employed religious poems instead of the scriptural psalms. In

¹¹The two statements are quoted in Chase, *America's Music*, pp. 26, 33. The first is from Thomas Walter, *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* . . . (Boston, 1721); the second is from an article that appeared in the *New England Courant* in 1724.

1707 the English minister Dr. Isaac Watts published a book, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, that became immensely popular in the colonies, especially among the black folk, because of the freshness and vitality of the words. In 1717 he published another collection of his attractive hymns, entitled *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Apply'd to the Christian State and Worship*.

Before long, people began to neglect the psalms, preferring to sing hymns instead, especially since the latter were fitted to lively tunes. One after the other, the various Protestant denominations in the colonies adopted the hymns of Watts, and the "Era of Watts" in the history of American religious music was under way.¹² The following example shows a Watts hymn based on Psalm 19.

A Morning Hymn, Isaac Watts, based on Psalm 19; Old Hundredth Tune



2. From the fair chambers of the east
The circuit of his race begins,
And without weariness or rest
Round the whole earth he flies and shines.
3. O like the Sun may I fulfil
Th' appointed Duties of the Day,
With ready Mind and active Will
March on and keep my heavenly Way.
4. But I shall rove and lose the Race,
If God my Sun should disappear,
And leave me in this World's wild Maze
To follow every wand'ring Star.

In 1737 a hymnal published by John Wesley, George Whitefield, and other students at Oxford University launched Wesley's career as a hymnal compiler and became the first of a long series of official Methodist hymnals. The book, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, included thirty-five hymns written by Watts, the remainder being contributed by a number of other men, among them Wesley's father and brother Charles, who with Wesley had founded the Methodist Church in 1729. Wesley had been influenced in his decision to compile a hymnal by the music of the Moravians, members of a

¹²See further in Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (New York, 1915), pp. 359 ff.

religious sect of German origin, who came to the colonies in 1735 on the same ship as the Wesley brothers. The deeply moving hymns sung by the Moravians while on shipboard impressed the Wesleys and, consequently, affected considerably the development of Methodist hymnody—and thus, as we shall see, indirectly affected Negro hymnody as well.

RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AND PSALMODY

Patterns of Slavery in North and South

In New England the white population was of predominantly English stock and belonged, for the most part, to the Congregational Church. The middle colonies, on the other hand, were settled by a variety of ethnic and religious groups: Dutch settlements were clustered around the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, Germans were in Pennsylvania, Swedes and Finns on the lower Delaware, and the English everywhere. Among the religious groups most interested in the plight of black men and women were the Quakers first and foremost; the Moravians; the Congregationalists to some extent; the Catholics; and the Methodists (beginning in the late eighteenth century).

Throughout the region slavery assumed a milder form than in the southern colonies, although in some places the harsh and severe treatment of black slaves provoked more than one rebellious uprising. Generally, slavery tended to be paternalistic, slaves being regarded as part of the family. They were listed as members of the family (usually taking the family's surname) on the "household baptism plan"; they lived in the home and worked alongside their masters in the field, shop, or kitchen. The attitude of the Puritan Cotton Mather toward his black servants was shared by many of his contemporaries, not only in Massachusetts but in the other colonies:

I would always remember that my servants are in some sence [sic] my children, and by taking care that they want nothing which may be good for them, I would make them as my children. . . . Nor will I leave them ignorant of anything, wherein I may instruct them to be useful. . . .¹³

With its large plantations the South resembled rural England, and the wealthy planters, many of them originally members of English nobility or landed gentry, led lives similar in some ways to those of English country gentlemen. The isolation of the plantation necessarily encouraged the development of considerable self-sufficiency on the part of the master family and the slaves. One of the richest and most powerful of the southern aristocrats, William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, wrote in 1726:

¹³This excerpt from Mather's "Sermon to Masters and Servants" is reprinted several places; for example, Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1881* (New York, 1915), p. 337.

I have my flocks and my birds, my bond-men and bond-women, and every soart of trade among my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but providence.¹⁴

The isolation of the plantation also gave the master unusual power over his family and slaves. He interpreted the slave codes and unwritten traditions as he willed; he made of the institution of slavery either the brutal experience that it was for most black men and women or something better, which at times and in certain places approximated the relatively humane condition of slavery in New England.

Conversion and Religious Instruction in the North

One of the major concerns of colonial clergymen was the matter of converting the so-called heathen of the New World, the African Americans and the Native Americans, to Christianity. And the act of conversion automatically included religious instruction. In New Amsterdam, as early as 1638, the citizens petitioned "Dominie" Bogardus, governor of the colony and pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church, for a "schoolmaster to teach and train the youth of both Dutch and blacks in the knowledge of Jesus Christ." When in 1641 a "Negro woman belonging to Rev. Stoughton of Dorchester [Massachusetts] . . . was received into the Church and baptized"—possibly the earliest slave baptism in the colonies—it was pointed out that she was "well approved . . . for sound knowledge and true godliness."¹⁵

White or black, servant or master, religious instruction was not only an essential prerequisite for membership in the church, but was also a basic part of daily life. A Massachusetts law of 1648, for example, instructed "all masters of families doe once a week (at the least) catechize their children and servants in the grounds and principles of Religion."¹⁶ A teacher's contract of 1682 in New York included among its articles of agreement: "School shall begin with the Lord's prayer and close by singing a Psalm."¹⁷

During the years 1702–85 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (hereafter referred to as SPG) sent clergymen to the colonies to minister to the slaves and to convert them to Christianity. This missionary organization of the Established Church of England was established in 1701. In association with their work the missionaries founded schools for the religious instruction of black folk. As early as 1704 the SPG appointed Elias Neau to open a catechizing school, which he conducted in his home in New

York. Within a year the group had increased to thirty persons, and Neau moved the school to Trinity Church. Psalm singing was included, of course, in the daily program.

In 1726 the rector and vestry of Trinity observed that "upwards of a hundred English and Negro servants" attended the catechism on Sundays and sang psalms at the close of instruction. In the same church the Reverend Richard Charlton reported to his superior in 1741 that forty-three Negroes were studying psalmody with the church organist, Johann Clemm (= Klemm). In 1745 Charlton wrote, "I have got our Clark to raise a Psalm when their instruction is over, and I can scarce express the satisfaction I have in seeing 200 Negroes and White Persons with heart and voice glorifying their Maker." In 1751 Joseph Hildreth reported that about twenty Negroes came to him regularly in the evenings for instruction in singing psalms.

Another religious group that concerned itself with teaching slaves was the Associates of Doctor Bray, an allied society of the SPG that was founded in 1723.¹⁸ The records show that slaves received regular training in the charity schools operated by the society in Philadelphia during the years 1758–75, in New York (1760–75), in Newport (1760–75), and in Williamsburg (1760–75). As in other places, psalmody instruction included not only teaching the tunes but also how to sing the psalms correctly. The instructors here and elsewhere would have had access to the first music-instruction books published in the colonies: *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm-Tunes, In a plain & Easy Method* (Boston, 1721) by the Reverend John Tufts, and *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained, or An Introduction to the Art of Singing by Note* (Boston, 1721) by the Reverend Thomas Walter.

When schoolmasters began in the eighteenth century to operate schools independently of the church, they retained psalm singing in the curriculum as a matter of course. We may be sure, for example, that psalmody was studied by the Negroes attending the school operated by Nathaniel Pigott in Boston, which announced in a newspaper advertisement (1728) that it was opened for the "Instruction of Negroes in Reading, Catechizing & Writing."¹⁹ The same would have been true in Samuel Keimer's school in Philadelphia, although his objective, as stated in a newspaper advertisement (1723), was simply to teach the slaves to "read the Holy Writ in a very uncommon, expeditious and delightful manner."²⁰

There was yet one other religious sect that gave musical instruction to

¹⁴Quoted in Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia*, ed. Richard Morton (1724; Chapel Hill, 1956), p. 8.

¹⁵The statement about the baptism in 1641 appears in John Winthrop's *Journal* and is reprinted in Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, p. 257.

¹⁶Quoted in Marcus W. Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607–1783* (Chicago, 1931), p. 91.

¹⁷Quoted in Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York* (New York, 1896), p. 31.

¹⁸The fullest account of the work of the SPG and Thomas Bray's Associates with the slaves is in Edgar Pennington, "Thomas Bray's Associates and Their Work Among the Negroes," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, new series, 48 (1938): 311–403. The quotations about religious instruction of the slaves at Trinity Church are in Pennington, pp. 385–91.

¹⁹Quoted in Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, p. 238.

²⁰Quoted in Edward Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C., 1911), p. 128.

converted black colonists—the Moravians, who settled first in Georgia, then permanently at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1741. One of the members of the first Moravian settlement at Bethlehem, the “Sea Congregation,” was Andrew the Negro (Andreas der Mohr).²¹ Andrew participated in the special activities assigned to the “single men,” one of which was the Saturday-evening twilight serenade, a gathering together of all the single men to sing hymns outside the buildings on the settlement grounds. Single and married people took part in the evening prayer services, generally in the form of song services. The entire congregation also celebrated “love feasts”—that is, services with emphasis on the taking of communion and the singing of psalms, hymns, and other spiritual songs.

The records do not indicate whether Andrew played an instrument in one of the Moravian ensembles, such as the *Collegium musicum* or the trombone choir. Members of the settlement took part in musical activities to the extent of their capabilities. Whether singer or instrumentalist, Andrew would have received excellent instruction in music from the musical leader of the settlement, Prylaeus, who was a demanding taskmaster. By 1747, at least four others had joined the congregation: another Andrew, Maria Magdalena, Johannes, and Jupiter. The extraordinary musical activity of the Moravians far surpassed that of other contemporary settlements; Bethlehem in particular became a musical center where visitors came from near and far to hear impressive performances of choral and instrumental music.

Missionary Activities in the South

In the South as in the North, there was concern for the souls of the slaves, and efforts were made to convert them. In some instances slaves attended church with their masters, sitting in the galleries or on the floors of churches; or they listened to the sermon through open windows from outside the church. Some slaveholders arranged for clergymen to preach to slave congregations in separate services at the church, or they brought ministers to the plantations to preach.

Not all clergymen were conscientious about their responsibilities for the souls of the slaves. In 1758 the Reverend Samuel Davies wrote that “thousands of Negroes are neglected or instructed just according to the character of the established clergy in their several parishes.”²² Ultimately, the amount of religious training given to the slaves depended upon their masters, however diligent the clergymen. Even slaveholders who were inclined toward humane treatment of their slaves hesitated to grant them religious instruc-

tion and baptism, at first because of the widely circulated idea that slaves who were received into the church would automatically achieve freedom. To refute this, the Virginia Assembly passed a law in 1667 specifically stating that the baptism of slaves did not exempt them from bondage and urging masters to encourage their slaves to accept Christianity. Maryland passed a similar law in 1671.

The slave owners were reluctant to allow their slaves to be converted, however, for additional reasons. The Reverend Hugh Jones pointed out in his book *The Present State of Virginia from Whence Is Inferred a Short View of Maryland and North Carolina* (1724): “As for baptising Indians and Negroes, several of the people disapprove of it; because they say it often makes them proud, and not as good servants.”²³ There was yet an even more compelling reason. Unlike in the North, where the black population reached early a relatively stable level, throughout the colonial period large numbers of Africans were still being imported into the southern colonies.

This continuous influx, resulting in ever-increasing numbers of black men and women in the South, contributed to the slaveholders’ well-founded fears of slave conspiracies and uprisings. As a consequence, the South paid a great deal of attention to all possible means of keeping the slaves under firm control. To allow the slaves to congregate together, for whatever reason, was simply not considered wise under the circumstances. Governor Spotswood of Virginia stated plainly in 1710 his objections to any kind of slave assemblage:

We are not to depend on either their stupidity, or that babel of languages among them; freedom wears a cap, which can without a tongue call together all those who long to shake off the fetters of slavery.²⁴

The Established Church of England exerted a strong and widespread influence on southerners, white as well as black, especially through its missionary society, the SPG. Each parish was provided with a minister-schoolmaster, who had to make periodic reports to the bishop of London or his representative in the colonies on the religious and educational conditions in his parish.

There are extant a number of documents attesting to the activities of colonial clergymen among the slaves, stating how many adults were taken into the church, how many infants baptized, how many slaves given religious instruction, and how many taught the basic rudiments of reading and writing. Religious instruction, moreover, always included the teaching of psalms and hymns. The slaves preferred the musical activities of the religious experience above all else.

In 1742 the Reverend Alexander Garden, Commissary of the Bishop of

²¹See further in Joseph Levering, *A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1741–1892* (Philadelphia, 1903), pp. 122 ff.

²²*Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies and Others . . .* (London, 1761), p. 9.

²³Jones, *Present State*, p. 99.

²⁴Quoted in Jones, p. 8.

London for South Carolina, opened a "School House" in Charles Town and staffed it with two black men, Harry and Andrew, whom he himself had educated. The school thrived for twenty-two years, reaching an enrollment of more than seventy children and a large number of adults before it was forced to close in 1764.²⁵ Most religious instruction, however, took place under less formal circumstances—on the plantation or in the church edifice.

In 1755 Samuel Davies (later to become president of Nassau Hall, i.e., Princeton University) wrote from Virginia to his superiors in London.²⁶

The Negroes above all the Human Species that I ever knew have an Ear for Musick, and a kind of extatic Delight in *Psalmody*; and there are no Books they learn so soon or take so much pleasure in, as those used in that heavenly Part of divine Worship.

On January 6, 1761, another missionary, the Reverend Mr. Wright, wrote to London in a similar vein:

My landlord tells me, when he waited on the colonel at his countyseat two or three days, they heard the Slaves at worship in their lodge, singing Psalms and Hymns in the evening, and again in the morning, long before break of day. They are excellent singers, and long to get some of Dr. Watts' Psalms and Hymns, which I encouraged them to hope for.

The psalms and hymns of Dr. Watts, so beloved by the slaves, were published in colonial editions as early as 1729 (*Psalms of David, Imitated*, in Philadelphia) and 1739 (*Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, in Boston). The missionaries acknowledged the preference of black folk for the hymns of Dr. Watts and requested Watts' hymnals along with Bibles in their orders sent to London. The Reverend Mr. Hutson wrote on July 11, 1758:

This is accompanied with the warmest gratitude for the late parcel of Books received from the Society, to distribute among the poor with us. . . . I was extremely glad of the Books for their sakes, especially the Bibles, Dr. Watts' Psalms and Hymns, and the Compassionate Address.

In 1760 the Reverend Mr. Todd lamented that he had been "obliged to turn sundry empty away who have come to me for Watts Psalms and Hymns."

In no way did religious instruction for black folk in the South attain the level that it did in the North; at no time did it reach an equivalent proportion of the black population. Indeed, during the colonial period most black folk were hardly touched by efforts of the missionaries. They lived in their separate quarters on the plantations and farms away from the whites, and

used their holiday Sundays "to dig up their small lots of ground allowed by their Master for potatoes, peas, etc."²⁷ and to divert themselves in dancing or watching cock fights. In many places slaves were made to work on Sundays, despite the colonial laws requiring slaveholders to set aside Sundays as free days.

RECREATIONAL MUSIC

Holiday Celebrations

For the most part the colonists in the North and in the South observed the same holidays: New Year's Day, Easter, Pentecost or Whitsunday, Election Day, Militia or Muster Day, and Christmas. The Puritans, to be sure, had fewer holidays than others; in 1699 a contemporary complained, "Election, Commencement and Training Days are their only Holy Days." The observance of Christmas was especially avoided among the Puritans. The special gala days of the "middling and inferior sort" were the annual fairs held in many towns and villages. For the gentry, celebrations of the birthdays of "prince and proprietary" or military events provided not only the public ceremonies which they shared with their fellow citizens, but also offered opportunities for holding exclusive formal dances, assemblies, and other kinds of special "Entertainments."

Sewall wrote about a typical celebration of the King's Birthday on October 14, 1685:

Many Guns fired, and at night a Bonfire on Noodles Island in remembrance of the King's Birthday. Some marched through the streets with Viols and Drums, playing and beating by turns.

Sewall did not identify the musicians as black or white, but contemporaneous sources attest to the fact that black folk generally joined the boisterous crowds that roamed the streets on holidays, some playing their fiddles, drums, and trumpets.

Militia Day, also called Training or Muster Day, never failed to attract a large gathering of bystanders, including slaves. More than likely, many a black fifer "picked up" the skill of playing his instrument on these occasions. In the early years all servants, including "Negars" and Indians, were compelled to undergo military training. Every company had at least one fifer (or trumpeter) and one drummer. During the 1650s colonial fears of Negro and Indian uprisings led to precautionary laws exempting the non-whites from military service. In later years they were allowed to enroll for

²⁵See further in Frederick Dalchro, *An Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina* (Charleston, 1820), pp. 148, 156–58, 174, 192–93. See also Pennington, "Thomas Bray's Associates," p. 337.

²⁶A reprint of excerpts from *Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies, and Others* is in RBAM. The "others" referred to in the title include Reverends Wright, Hutson, and Todd.

²⁷Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters . . .*, ed. Hunter D. Farish (1900; Williamsburg, 1957), p. 70.

service only as drummers, fifers, trumpeters, or pioneers. In times of emergency, to be sure, the colonists conveniently forgot their laws and pressed black men into service as fighters, particularly during the French and Indian War.

New Year's Day was an occasion for merrymaking everywhere. In some places men went from house to house firing gun salutes, finally gathering on the village green for a day of riotous fun. In Boston, trumpets instead of guns were used for New Year's Day saluting. In 1705 the trumpeter who gave a New Year's salute to Judge Sewall was a black musician:

Colonel Hobbey's Negro came about 8 or 9 mane and sends in by David to have leave to give me a Levit [trumpet blast] and wish me a merry new year. I admitted it: gave him 3 Reals. Sounded very well.

Twice a year in the South, at Christmas and at Easter, the slaves were given a respite of several days from work to celebrate their jubilees. Christmas was the most joyous festival of the year. Fithian wrote about one Christmas Eve: "Guns are fired this Evening in the Neighborhood and the Negroes seem to be inspired with new life." The days following Christmas were spent in merrymaking and dancing to the music of the fiddle or banjo—most often the fiddle. On Easter Sunday, people dressed in their finest and went to church—"all the Parish seemed to meet together, High, low, black, white, all came out." Afterward, the slaves were "disbanded till the [following] Wednesday morning." Their chief mode of diverting themselves during the Easter vacation was dancing to fiddle music. But then the favorite form of entertainment for their masters, too, was dancing!²⁸

Social Diversions of the Colonists

A variety of informal social activities were available to colonial villagers, participated in by white and black alike: church and house raisings, maple sugarings, cornhuskings, etc., most of these generally followed by dancing to the music of the fiddle. When there was no special activity taking place, people gathered together in taverns, where they danced and sang "wanton ditties." By the beginning of the third decade of the eighteenth century, people living in towns could listen to concerts performed in concert rooms, in taverns, or in homes. Dancing, however, was more popular. During the 1730s and 1740s, dancing assemblies were organized in Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and some smaller towns, with membership limited, for the most part, to the aristocracy. The Philadelphia Assembly foundered at times because of the combined influence of the staid Quakers and the "Great Awakening" movement, but eventually gained a reputation for being one of the most brilliant and exclusive assemblies in the colonies.

²⁸Fithian, *Journal*, p. 89.

Slave Dance Musicians

In the North black musicians provided much of the dance music for the colonists of all classes; they played for country dances, balls in the towns, and frequently for dancing schools, too. One of the best-known fiddlers in New England was Sampson, slave of Colonel Archelaus Moore. For many years Sampson "afforded fine fun for frolicsome fellows in Concord [Massachusetts] with his fiddle on Election Days."²⁹ The fiddler Polydor Gardiner of Narragansett was in great demand for parties and dances, as were also Caesar, slave fiddler of East Guilford, and Barzillai (Zelah) Lew, fiddler of Groton. In Wallingford, Connecticut, Colonel Barker's slave Cato "ranked high as a fiddler in the community" and provided music "for balls on the nights preceding the annual Thanksgiving and other occasions when dancing was expected." Of another slave in the area, Robert Prim, it was said that he and his violin were "indispensable requisites at every party or merrymaking." Although few other names of black dance musicians have been preserved for posterity, most of the colonial villages and towns had access to some fiddler on whom they could rely to furnish music for their dances, and very often that fiddler was a black man, slave or free.³⁰

Slave musicians also played in some of the dancing schools that were established in the towns to prepare the socially minded citizens for the great amount of dancing that took place. After all, slaves were reliable, skilled enough, affable, and cheap. An anecdote of old New York reports on the slave Caesar, who drove the coach that took the young ladies to the dancing school, played for the dancing, and then served as a waiter during refreshment time. The dancing began at one o'clock in the afternoon. "Caesar, on their arrival, tuned his three-string fiddle, the gentlemen appeared . . . and at it they went, dancing and skipping for dear life until 8 o'clock."³¹

All over the South slaves played for the dancing of their masters at balls, assemblies, and special "Entertainments" in the plantation ballrooms and "palaces" of the colonial governors. As an urban center, Charles Town offered opportunity for the "better sort" to live as did their counterparts in cities of the North and in European capitals—to attend concerts, plays, balls, assemblies, and other sophisticated entertainments. There were singing schools and dancing schools, which attracted men as well as women. Any young gentleman was "presumed to be acquainted with Dancing, Boxing, playing the Fiddle, & Small-Sword, & Cards."³² In Charles Town,

²⁹Nathaniel Bouton, *The History of Concord* (Concord, Mass., 1856), p. 252.

³⁰Reference to Cato and Prim in Charles Henry Davis, *History of Wallingford, Connecticut* (Meriden, CT, 1870), pp. 341, 344. See also Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, pp. 249 ff.

³¹John F. Watson, *Annals and Occurrences of New York City and State . . .* (Philadelphia, 1846), p. 212.

³²Quotation from Fithian, *Journal*, p. 161.

because of the tremendous demand for skilled and unskilled labor, the slaves were able to develop their talents and skills to a greater extent than in any other colonial town. Black men worked at all trades, crafts, and arts. They seriously competed with white laborers and actually took over some trades—to such an extent that in 1744 some white artisans petitioned the commons house for relief from the ruinous competition.

In addition to Charles Town, the villages of Annapolis in Maryland, and Richmond and Williamsburg (called Middle Plantation from 1633 to 1699) in Virginia provided social and cultural activities for the southern colonists, some of whom maintained townhouses in the villages in addition to their plantation residences. Wherever there were dancing and music, there was apt to be a slave musician playing the fiddle or flute or French horn for the dancers, whether in the town or on the plantation.

It may be assumed that black musicians occasionally participated in more formal musical activity as well. In 1752, for example, the president of the Tuesday Club in Annapolis—a club whose motto was “fiddlers, fools and farces” but whose chief activity seems to have been composing music—complained that the members’ musical compositions were of low quality, that “only the ditties of a visiting Negro boy showed talent.”³³

The royal governor in Williamsburg gave splendid affairs, at which the colonists performed country dances, minuets, and reels, including their favorite *Sir Roger de Coverley* or the *Virginia Reel*. Interestingly enough, colonists were also fond of a special type of lively jig called by some the “Negro Jig.” In 1774 Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman traveling in Maryland, saw one of these:

37 Ladies dressed and powdered to life. All of them fond of dancing. . . . Betwixt the country dances they have what I call everlasting Jigs. A couple gets up and begins to cut a jig (to some Negro tune). Others come and cut them out, and these dances always last as long as the Fiddler can play.³⁴

This reference to a “Negro tune” may well represent the earliest record of the influence of slave music on the white colonists. Fithian, too, writes about whites dancing “giggs,” but does not identify the music to which such dancing was done. There is a *Negro Jig* in a dance collection of 1782, *A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs*, published by James Aird in Scotland. There is no way of knowing whether this piece was of slave origin, or whether it was composed in imitation of a slave dance tune. The implication is clear, however, that the colonists were developing an awareness of the distinctive qualities of so-called “Negro music” and using this music for dancing.

Few names of black dance musicians in the South have come down to

³³Lubov Keefer, *Baltimore's Music* (Baltimore, 1962), p. 18.

³⁴*The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774–1777*, ed. Lincoln MacVeagh (New York, 1924), pp. 52–53. See further about the Negro Jig in Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Urbana, 1977), p. 122.



A slave fiddler plays for colonial dancers. From an engraving by Howard Helmick in “Old Maryland Homes and Ways” by J. W. Palmer, *Century Magazine*, 1894.

us from the colonial period. Generally, the records simply indicate that some slaves were especially valued for their musical skills; for example, the “accomplished black fiddler” on the plantation of Richard Bailey in Accomack County, Virginia. We do know, however, that the young slave fiddler belonging to Charles Carrol of Annapolis was named John Stokes and that Simeon (Sy) Gilliat (d. 1820), the slave violinist owned by Baron Botetourt of Williamsburg (royal governor of Virginia), was reputed to be very skilled.³⁵

³⁵Reference to Virginia fiddler in Philip A. Bruce, *Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, 1907), p. 181; discussion of Sy Gilliat in Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond*

What kind of music did the colonists have for their dancing? Contemporaneous accounts mention most often the music of violins. It is probable that for gala occasions oboes and transverse flutes were added to the string ensembles. The fact that the dance tunes in a popular collection, *Thompson's Compleat Collection of 200 Favourite Country Dances Performed at Court . . .*, were arranged or "Set for the Violin, German flute & Hautboy" suggests such a probability. Moreover, the references to slave musicians point out that most often they were violinists and flutists, a phenomenon perhaps to be attributed more to the demands of the white colonists for dance musicians than to mere coincidence or to any preference for these instruments among the black people.

Several excellent sources of dance music were available to colonial dance musicians, of which . . . the two best-known collections were published in England. In addition to the Thompson collection, there was one even better known and more popular, *The English Dancing Master or Plaine and Easie Rules for the Dancing of Country Dances with the Tune to Each Dance*, by John Playford, author of several other music manuals. These two books contained a varied repertory of traditional ballad tunes, country dance tunes, and the more formal court-dance melodies. Consequently, dance musicians could provide music for all of the colonists' favorite dances; for example, *Pea Straw*, *Faithful Shepherd*, *Arcadian Nuptials*, *Lady Hancock*, and *Boston's Delight*. Some of the tunes in the Playford collection, such as *Greensleeves* or *Selling's Round* or *Paul's Steeple*, were extremely popular in the colonies.

Social Singing

None of the white colonists in the North, not even the Puritans, limited themselves exclusively to the singing of psalms. They sang the old ballads brought with them from Europe, and they called upon various kinds of worksongs—sea chanties, weavers' songs, sugar-making songs, etc.—to ease their labors. As early as the seventeenth century, some clergymen began to speak out against the people's excessive attention to secular music.

Some of the "idle, foolish ballads" sung by the settlers were Yankee versions of English ballads; for example, *Barb'ry Ellen* (*Barbara Allen*) or *Dirante, My Son* (*Lord Randall, My Son*). When ballad makers needed tunes for topical songs they drew upon the melodies of old favorites, such as the tune *Derry Down, Down, Down* (*The Three Ravens*) for a text about the notorious Kitty Crow in 1765, or the *Boston Come All Ye* tune for a satirical text entitled *The Paxton Expedition* (ca. 1764). One of the most popular songs of all was the *Yankee Song*:

Corn stalks twist your hair off,
Cart-wheel frolic round you.
Old fiery dragon carry you off,
And mortar pessel pound you.

The tune with different words later became better known as *Yankee Doodle*.

In singing schools the colonists could learn to sing not only psalms, but also secular songs, "catches, glees, [and] canons . . . with sobriety and ease." Consequently, what was not picked up in the tavern or on the street could be learned from a singing master. Black folk sang all kinds of songs at all times. They sang psalms along with the white settlers and turned to hymns in the eighteenth century along with everyone else. They sang the old African songs as long as they could remember them—especially on the occasions of special slave festivals, as we shall see. In the taverns and on the streets they sang the ballads and ribald songs of the white colonists. And when they tired of singing those or had exhausted the repertory, they made up their own songs, stumbling a bit over the unfamiliar English or Dutch or Swedish or German or French words (depending upon where they lived), but managing, nevertheless, to express their ideas in these alien tongues.

Slave Recreational Activities

In addition to participating in the recreational activities of white colonists, slaves also developed their own traditions of merrymaking. As early as 1702 the city fathers of Philadelphia complained that "Negroes commonly meete together in a riott and tumultuous manner on the first day of the week." Many a white clergyman protested against the way the Sabbath was observed by the slaves "in frolicking, dancing, and other profane courses." In 1709, for example, Dr. LeJau, one of the first SPG missionaries, regretted that "It has been customary among them to have their feasts, dances, and merry meetings upon the Lord's Day."³⁶ The planters, however, generally accepted the fact that the slaves, having no other free time during the week and not being admitted into the church for one reason or another, should use Sundays as a day of rest and diversion. English traveler Nicholas Cresswell wrote in his journal in 1774:

Mr. Bayley and I went to see a Negro Ball. Sundays being the only days these poor creatures have to themselves, they generally meet together and amuse themselves with Dancing to the Banjo. . . . They all appear to be exceedingly happy at these merrymakings and seem if they had forgot or were not sensible of their miserable condition.³⁷

As a matter of fact, the attitude of the slaves toward the Sabbath was not very different from that of their white counterparts. Fithian's diary reveals:

A Sunday in Virginia dont seem to wear the same Dress as our Sundays to the Northward. Generally here by five o'clock on Saturday every face (especially the

³⁶Francis LeJau, *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis LeJau, 1706–1717*, ed. Frank Klingberg (Berkeley, 1956), p. 61.

³⁷Cresswell, *Journal*, p. 18.

Negroes) looks festive and cheerful. All the lower class of people, & the Servants, & the slaves, consider it a Day of Pleasure and Amusement & spend it in such Diversions as they severally choose.³⁸

Colonial records contain few references to exclusively black musical activities. Chroniclers of life in the eighteenth century generally seem to have been unconcerned about what happened in the slave quarters, and visitors to the plantations were not curious enough—in those times—to spy. The colonists, of course, were aware that a great deal of dancing went on to the music of fiddles, most of them homemade. In Maryland Cresswell noticed that the slaves were playing a different kind of string instrument and described it:

This instrument (if it may be so called) is made of a Gourd something in the imitation of a Guitar, with only four strings and played with the fingers in the same manner.³⁹

Cresswell noted further that the music of the banjo was accompanied by the singing of “very droll music indeed,” the slaves singing about their masters and mistresses “in a very satirical manner.”

Cresswell’s description of a banjo (1774) is apparently the earliest such reference in colonial writings, although these instruments may have been found among the slaves even in the seventeenth century. Obviously, however, they were not common during colonial times. The singing at Cresswell’s “Negro Ball” reflects the African propensity for musical improvisation. The singers vied with one another in poking fun at their masters—a practice reported again and again by chroniclers—making up their verses as they sang and each trying to outdo the previous singer. The white observer noted that the “poetry [was] like the music—rude and uncultivated.” The music was evidently African, for no other kind would have been appropriate for the slaves’ dancing, which to Cresswell was “so irregular and grotesque” that he was “not able to describe it.”

DEVELOPMENT OF MUSICAL SKILLS

One persistent question, for which there seems to be no satisfactory answer, is how the slaves, lacking personal possessions and control of their time, developed instrumental skills. Although the African heritage gave them a natural talent for and inclination toward making music, they came to the New World emptyhanded, and upon arrival had to acquaint themselves with strange instruments and different ways of handling them. To be sure, some of the instruments were similar to those the Africans had known in their own country, but the instruments were not identical. In music—as in

³⁸Fithian, *Journal*, p. 137.

³⁹Cresswell, p. 18.

language, religion, and customs—the Africans had to adjust to the ways of their white masters.

Only tentative answers, based on the meager evidence available, can be offered to the question. With regard to the acquiring of instruments, it is obvious that many slave musicians must have fashioned their own instruments from whatever materials were at hand. In some instances slave owners purchased instruments for their slaves. The following excerpt from a letter written in 1719 by a Philadelphian Quaker supports both these suppositions:

Thou knowest Negro Peter’s Ingenuity In making for himself and playing on a fiddle without any assistance. As the thing in them [i.e., the musical impulse] is Innocent and diverting and may keep them from worse Employment, I have to Encourage [him] in my Service promist him one from England. Therefore buy and bring a good strong well-made Violin with 2 or 3 Sets of spare Gut for the Suitable Strings. Get somebody of skill to Chuse and by [buy] it. . . .⁴⁰

How widely the practice of buying musical instruments for slaves was followed during the colonial period is a question that cannot be satisfactorily answered until more evidence comes to light.

With regard to the development of skill in playing an instrument, we may assume that most slaves taught themselves to play. There is documentary evidence for such an assumption in the case of nineteenth-century slave musicians. It is thus logical to accept the notion that colonial slaves also might have taught themselves, especially since they were closer to the African tradition, and would have remembered the musical activities they pursued before coming to the New World. The curious phrasing in a newspaper “runaway” advertisement throws considerable light on the question of how other slaves might have learned to play musical instruments:

Whereas Cambridge, a Negro Man belonging to James Oliver of Boston doth absent himself sometimes from his Master: said Negro plays well upon a flute, and not so well on a Violin. This is to desire all Masters and Heads of Families not to suffer said Negro to come into their Houses to teach their Prentices or Servants to play, nor on any other Accounts. All Masters of Vessels are also forbid to have anything to do with him on any Account, as they may answer it in the Law. N. B. Said Negro is to be sold: Enquire of said Oliver.

[*Boston Evening Post*, October 24, 1743]

This advertisement suggests that in Boston, at least, slaveholders followed the practice of engaging slave musicians to teach their slaves and, as well, their apprenticed white servants. (Slaves are commonly referred to as servants in colonial sources.) Who taught the slave music-teachers? Did they “pick up” their skills, or were they apprenticed out to white professional musicians? Undoubtedly both questions may be answered in the affirmative. At any rate, there is nothing in the available evidence to suggest that slaves

⁴⁰Turner, *Negro in Pennsylvania*, p. 42.

as a group were given instrumental lessons—that is, in the same way as they were taught to sing correctly in psalmody classes.

Under the circumstances, then, the musical instruments favored by the slaves would have had to fulfill three conditions: first, the instruments had to offer a minimum of technical difficulties in the learning process, so that they could be learned with little or no professional help; second, the instruments had to be easily available and so easily handled that the slaves could carry them around and practice them at odd times of the day or night, whenever there were a few extra minutes to spare; third, the instruments had to be useful, so that once the slaves had learned to play them they would have opportunities to perform for others.

In the South, too, the slaves managed to find ways to develop their musical skills despite the restrictions of the social structure. Those fortunate enough to live on the great plantations or in homes of wealthy townsmen were generally exposed to a high level of cultural activity. Fithian's journal and letters are valuable for the information they contain about life in the South. The young Princeton graduate, who spent two years (1773–74) as a "Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion" to the children of the aristocrat Robert Carter, gives a vivid description of the mode of life for the wealthy and, as well, for indentured servants, white and black. Fithian's employer had a large collection of musical instruments on his plantation, Nomini Hall: "a Harpsichord, Forte Piano, Harmonica, Guittar, Violin, & German Flutes . . . & at Williamsburg [the site of his townhouse] a good Organ." Almost every evening in the Carter home the members of the family played chamber music. The slaves, who moved freely about the house and among the members of the family, listened to the music along with their masters and doubtless "picked out" pieces on the musical instruments whenever they found opportunities to do so.

To teach the sons and daughters of the wealthy colonists, itinerant music masters traveled from plantation to plantation, staying several days at each place, depending upon the number of persons to be given musical instruction. Mr. Stadley, the German music master who taught the Carter children, generally remained three or four days each time he came to Nomini Hall, chiefly to instruct the young women in the art of playing the violin and "Forte Piano." With Mr. Stadley in the house, the evenings provided occasions for playing more demanding chamber music and singing, to which a professional added a great deal of zest.

It was inevitable that musically inclined slaves should benefit from the periodic visits of music masters to the plantations. Those who worked about the house would have been able to listen to the instruction of the music masters and to observe how passages could be executed on various instruments. Frequently, young people of slaveholding families taught the slaves to play flutes and violins themselves. Fithian, for example, commented more than once upon the close relationship existing between "several Negroes, & Ben & Harry [the Carter boys]." More than once, the young Carters were

chased from the schoolroom where they had been dancing with some slaves to the music of fiddles. Finally, in some instances, slaveholders arranged for black folk to be given lessons; such a practice equipped the slave with sufficient musical skill to play for plantation dances or to entertain visiting guests.

Students took their slaves with them to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg (established in 1693). Some contemporaries thought it unfortunate that there were not special quarters for the slaves, similar to the "apartment" for the Native Americans. "There is very great occasion for a quarter for the Negroes and inferior servants belonging to the college," wrote Hugh Jones in 1724.⁴¹ For the slaves, however, the circumstance was fortunate; they lived in the rooms of their young masters and undoubtedly attended classes with them on various occasions. More than likely, many a slave at the college learned to "play very well on the Violin" or to "play extremely well on the French horn" from attending music classes which were taught by "masters from the town" rather than by members of the regular faculty.⁴²

The evidence suggests that some slaves in Charles Town and other urban centers of the South must have been taught to play by professional musicians, just as slaves were trained in bricklaying, carpentry, soldering, etc. Despite the laws against the teaching of black slaves, intrepid southerners taught them any number of skills and trades. As we have seen, Commissary Alexander Garden operated a Negro School House (1742–64), using as teachers two young slaves whom he himself had educated. The course of study included psalmody, along with reading, writing, and catechism.

Another school for slaves in Charles Town was maintained by a Mr. Boulson, who in 1740 turned his dancing school and concert room into a school for slaves after he was converted by the evangelist George Whitefield. The records fail to indicate the subjects taught by Mr. Boulson to his fifty-three black students, but it is improbable that the former music master would neglect singing.⁴³

Slaves frequently played the fiddle for dancing in the home and for dancing classes. Many were the nights at Nomini Hall, for example, when "John the Waiting Man played" and the young ladies spent the evening "merrily in dancing." Just as there were itinerant music masters for young southerners, so were there itinerant dancing masters. The dancing teachers held classes in rotation at the plantation homes of their scholars, giving instruction at each place for several days in succession. Their pupils traveled with them from one plantation to the other, remaining as guests in the house where the dancing classes were being held.

⁴¹In regard to the teaching of music and dancing to college students, see Jones, *Present State*, pp. 11, 19, 250.

⁴²Quotations about slave instrumentalists from contemporary slave advertisements.

⁴³Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, p. 451.