



William Tans'ur's Influence on William Billings¹

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IN HIS SEMINAL MONOGRAPH, *Protestant Church Music in America*, Robert Stevenson wrote:

It is especially easy to document Tans'ur's early influence on William Billings (1746-1800)—whose début publication, *The New-England Psalm-Singer: or American Chorister* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1770), begins with an Introduction adapted from Tans'ur's "New Introduction to the Grounds of Musick" and whose *Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston: Draper and Folsom, 1778) contains a glossary (pp. 23-27) copied from Tans'ur. Even more crucially, Tans'ur's influence can be detected in Billings's musical praxis.²

Stevenson goes on to present a few examples of Tans'ur's influence on Billings, but, in a modest-sized book of only 168 pages devoted to covering the

whole of Protestant church music in America from the late sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Stevenson could not allow much space to develop his thesis. He does mention the prevalence of parallel fifths and octaves, the lack of suspensions, and a few other basic traits that the music of Billings and his American contemporaries shared with that of Tans'ur and his mid-eighteenth-century British colleagues. The purpose of this study is to pick up clues that Stevenson supplied, look at the various aspects of William Tans'ur's influence on William Billings, assess its force and duration, and try to determine the extent of the stylistic debt that Billings owed to that British psalmist.

Stevenson, of course, was not the first to recognize Tans'ur's influence on New-England composers of the eighteenth century. Although he does not make a direct claim, J. Murray Barbour, in his *The Church Music of William Billings*, leaves no doubt by his numerous musical examples that he considers Tans'ur a major force on early American psalmody.³ Before Barbour, both John Tasker Howard and Oscar Sonneck had noted Tans'ur's pervasive influence on American psalmists.⁴ Nineteenth-century writers were also cognizant of it and quick to point out its pernicious effects. Nathaniel D. Gould, in his *Church Music in America*, noted Tans'ur's authority

¹In this paper, Billings's tunebooks will be cited as follows: *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (Boston: Edes and Gill [1770]) as NEPS; *The Singing Master's Assistant* (Boston: Draper and Folsom, 1778) as SMA; *Music in Miniature* (Boston: the Author, 1779) as MIM; *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (Boston: the Author, 1781) as PSA; *The Suffolk Harmony* (Boston: John Norman, 1786) as SH; and *The Continental Harmony* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1794) as CH. *The Complete Works of William Billings* (Boston: The American Musicological Society and The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1977-) will be cited as follows: Vol. I, ed. by Karl Kroeger, as WBI; Vol. II, ed. by Hans Nathan, as WBI; and Vol. III, ed. by Karl Kroeger as WBIII.

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²Robert Stevenson, *Protestant Church Music in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 60-61.

³J. Murray Barbour, *The Church Music of William Billings* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), passim.

⁴John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music*, 3d ed. (New York: Crowell, 1946), 50; O. G. Sonneck, *Francis Hopkinson . . . and James Lyon* (Washington: H. L. McQueen, 1905), 166.



among Gould's earlier colleagues,⁵ and the author of an anonymous biographical sketch of Billings in *Moore's World of Music* wrote:

He [Billings] had little knowledge of counterpoint, having seen probably no work on the science or rules of harmony, except, perhaps, Tansur's grammar [sic], a very meagre and imperfect treatise.⁶

The name of William Tansur is generally unfamiliar today, although many have undoubtedly sung his enduring hymn-tunes BANGOR, COLCHESTER, and ST. MARTIN's in Sunday church services. During the eighteenth century, however, his fame was widespread in the country and small-town churches of both England and America. He was recognized as an important composer of tunes and anthems for parish-churches and also as a leading authority on theoretical aspects of music. He claims to have been born in 1700 at Dunchurch, near Rugby, in Warwickshire and, for a number of years, to have led the peripatetic life of a singing master in southeast England.⁷ He finally settled in St. Neots, Cambridgeshire, as a bookseller and music teacher, where he died in 1783. His publications, spanning the years 1734 to 1772, include nine collections of psalm-tunes and anthems, numbering nearly 150 individual pieces,⁸ and a theoretical treatise, *A New Musical Grammar*

(London, 1746), which continued being reprinted well into the nineteenth century.⁹

In America, Tansur's influence was most prevalent during the 1760s through the 1780s. His first tunes began to appear in American collections in the early 1760s. Thomas Johnston's reprint of Thomas Walter's *The Grounds and Rules of Musick Explained* (Boston, c1760), includes COLCHESTER and ST. MARTIN's. Josiah Flagg's *A Collection of the Best Psalm Tunes* (Boston, 1764), contains nine tunes and one anthem credited to Tansur. Flagg's second publication, *Sixteen Anthems* (Boston, c1766), includes nine anthems by Tansur, far more than by any other psalmist in the collection. In Daniel Bayley's revision of Walter's tunebook, *A New and Compleat Introduction to the Grounds and Rules of Musick* (Boston, 1766), he not only includes several of Tansur's tunes, but, in the theoretical introduction supplements Walter's original rudiments of music with text taken from Tansur.¹⁰ In the following year, 1767, the Boston printer William M'Alpine—probably at Daniel Bayley's instigation—reprinted nearly the whole of Tansur's *The Royal Melody Compleat*, calling it a "Third Edition".¹¹ In 1768, Bayley took over its publication, issuing it from Newburyport, and in 1769 he combined it with a reprint of Aaron Williams's *The Universal Psalmist* (London, 1763), calling both "The American Harmony". *The American Harmony* went through five more editions to 1774, after which Bayley continued to use selections from Tansur's music and ideas in his later tunebooks. In a prefatory "advertisement" to the Williams section, dubbed "American Harmony . . . Vol. II," Bayley remarked:

And I would inform them [i.e., his "Friends and Customers"] that I have now added the chief of Mr. Williams's *Universal Psalmody*:—And as I expect they will be bound *mostly* with the *Royal Melody*, I have therefore

⁵ Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: A. N. Johnson, 1853), 43.

⁶ "William Billings," *Moore's World of Music*, new series, 1, no. 1 (1842), 10. Alexander W. Thayer later credited the sketch to Nahum Mitchell (1769–1853), a distinguished Massachusetts jurist who had been active in psalmody in the late 18th and early 19th century, and who had known Billings personally. See "Mr. Thayer's Catalogue Continued," *The World of Music*, iv, no. 10 (1 May 1847), 38.

⁷ Through the prefaces of his tunebooks one can trace Tansur's movements from Surrey in the 1730s to Cambridge in the 1750s, and to Leicestershire and Lincolnshire in the 1760s. Although Tansur claims to have been born in 1700, he was apparently not baptised until 1706 (See *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, "Tansur, William"). There is no explanation for this discrepancy.

⁸ This count, based on my analysis of the contents of his tunebooks, includes both original tunes and arrangements. Tansur seems to have been rather free with his caption, "Composed by W.T.," which appears at the head of most of the pieces in his tunebooks. Some tunes with this heading are known to be by other composers. They usually appear in Tansur's collections with varied vocal parts, perhaps, in his mind justifying the composition claim.

⁹ The seventh edition was published in 1829. Tansur's *The Elements of Music Displayed* (London, 1772) is essentially a revised reprint of *A Musical Grammar*, covering the same material in much the same way, with little that is new.

¹⁰ The second section is taken from Tansur's *The Royal Melody Compleat* (London, 1755).

¹¹ For a concise summary of the rather complex bibliography of *The American Harmony*, see Irving Lowens and Allen P. Britton, "Daniel Bayley's 'The American Harmony': A Bibliographical Study," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, lxx (1955), 340–354.



left out those Tunes which were in it; and as Mr. Tans'ur's *Introduction to Musick* is universally approved, I have not added Mr. Williams's, which is very lengthy.¹²

Tans'ur's psalm-tunes and anthems arrived in America at a critical point in American church music. As a result of nearly four decades of singing-school activity in New England, some of the old Puritan prejudices against choirs and elaborate music in public worship were beginning to crumble.¹³ Tans'ur's melodies, with their swinging triple-time motion or their propulsive dactylic rhythms, caught the fancy of the younger members of the congregations, who by and large made up the church choirs.¹⁴ As a result, over the next two decades most of the old, staid tunes, borrowed mostly from John Playford's seventeenth-century psalters, were replaced by the more spirited English melodies derived from the publications of William Tans'ur, Aaron Williams, William Knapp, John Arnold, and Joseph Stephenson. Beginning in 1770, American composers began contributing to this repertory with works in the same or a similar style.

Just when William Billings became familiar with William Tans'ur's music and theoretical writings is as yet unknown, but by the time he issued his first tunebook in 1770, he was clearly under Tans'ur's sway.¹⁵ Not only the musical contents of *The New-England Psalm-Singer* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1770), but also the theoretical introduction show this influence clearly. McKay and Crawford noted Billings's debt to Tans'ur in their biography of Billings:

The most obvious similarities between the *New-England Psalm-Singer* and Tans'ur's [*Royal Melody Compleat*] are found in the glossary, which Billings seems to have taken over almost verbatim from Tans'ur. Other less ob-

vious correspondences may also be found throughout the introduction: phrases here and there are identical or are close paraphrases; items are treated in similar succession; diagrams are copied. When these facts are taken together with the knowledge that Billings quoted Tans'ur in the introductions to the *Singing Master's Assistant* (1778) and the *Continental Harmony* (1794), the other two major prefatory essays he wrote, his debt to Tans'ur is emphasized.¹⁶

However, as McKay and Crawford point out, Billings did not confine himself to Tans'ur words and ideas.

Billings was no plagiarist; he did not plug large segments of Tans'ur's theoretical introduction into his own. Rather he seems to have taken Tans'ur as a guide, to have pondered over Tans'ur's introduction and assimilated it, then recast it into somewhat different form, perhaps in combination with other sources.¹⁷

Although he used Tans'ur as his primary guide, Billings had probably familiarized himself with several other earlier British and American tunebooks. In the "Introduction" to the modern edition of *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, I have noted ten books that Billings almost certainly knew—books by Davenport, Arnold, Williams, Flagg, Walter, and Bayley, as well as William Tans'ur.¹⁸ However, Tans'ur remained the model, and Tans'ur's guiding hand is found in almost every aspect of Billings's 1770 theoretical introduction.

As an example of how Billings adapted Tans'ur's words and thoughts, let us compare a few similar passages from *The New-England Psalm-Singer* and *The Royal Melody Compleat*. Both, for example, describe the effect of keys in a similar manner, using many of the same phrases, but Billings is simpler and more direct in his presentation.

¹²A. Williams, *The American Harmony, or Universal Psalm-odist*, Vol. II (Newburyport: Daniel Bayley, 1771), [iii].

¹³See the section "The Establishment of Choirs" in Alan Buechner, *Yankee Singing Schools and the Golden Age of Choral Music in New England* (D.Ed. dissertation, Harvard University, 1960), 262–282, particularly Table 5, 268–270. The table demonstrates that most choirs in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire were formed during the 1760s and 1770s.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 283–285.

¹⁵McKay and Crawford speculate that Billings may have been a member of a singing group that Boston schoolmaster John Tileston referred to in his diary as the "Tansur Singers" in 1762. See David P. McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 47.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸WBI, xxxv. In all likelihood Billings had access to a collection of British and American tunebooks that Josiah Flagg must have assembled while compiling his two earlier publications: *A Collection of the Best Psalm Tunes* (Boston, 1764), and *Sixteen Anthems* (Boston, 1766). Flagg's connection with *The New-England Psalm-Singer* is demonstrated by his name being listed among the tunebook's sales agents. A closer connection between Billings and Flagg is drawn by the fact that the same engraving tools used to punch the musical plates for Flagg's *Sixteen Anthems* were also used for engraving *The New-England Psalm-Singer*.

Tans'ur

In Musick there are but two *natural*, primitive Keys, viz. *C faut*, the *sharp* and cheerful Key; and *A re*, the *flat* and melancholy Key: And that no *Tune* can be formed on any other Key but these two, without the Help of placing either *Flats* or *Sharps* at the beginning of the five *Lines*; which transposes *B-mi*, the *Center*, or *Master-Note* (together with all the rest in their Order, both above and below it) to be the same Effect as the *Two Natural Keys*.¹⁹

Billings based his discussion of triple time closely upon Tans'ur's, but again he simplified the language, eliminating words and phrases which were obscure and likely to be of little practical use to singers.

Tans'ur

Tripla-Time is measured in *Odd Numbers*, as 3, 6, 9, &c. each *Bar* including either 3 *Semibreves*, 3 *Minims*, 3 *Crotchets*, or 3 *Quavers*; two of which must be sung, or played with the *Hand*, or *Foot down*, and one *up*; so that you are just as long again *down* as *up*.

The First, and generally the slowest *Mood*, in *Tripla-Time*, is called *Sesquialtera Proportion*, being a *Triple Measure* of three *Notes* to two such like *Notes* in *Common-Time*, and sung, or play'd in the same *Time*; which is one fourth part quicker in every *Bar*.

This *Mood* is called *Three to Two*, and includes three *Minims* in a *Bar*, which are performed in the same *Time* as two *Minims* in *Common-Time*; two beat *down*, and one *up*; marked thus: 3/2.²⁰

Another influence of Tans'ur on Billings's theoretical introduction is seen in the snippets of doggerel verse strewn here and there. This may have functioned as an *aide-memoire* for the singing-school student in remembering the strange and occasionally complicated rules of music. Here Billings did not copy Tans'ur directly, but relied upon his own poetical gifts to render the rules into verse.

Tans'ur

If that by *Flats* the *Mi* you
do remove,
It must be called in the
Fourth above;
(or a *Fifth* below.)
But, if by *Sharps* the *Mi*
removed is,
Rise up *Five Notes*, and
then you can't it miss;
(or a *Fourth* below.)²¹

Billings

There are but two natural primitive Keys in Musick, viz. C, the sharp and cheerful Key, and A, the flat and melancholly [sic] Key. No Tune can be formed rightly and truly, but in one of these two Keys, except the Mi be transposed by either Flats or Sharps, which are set at the Beginning of the five Lines, which brings them to the same Effect as the two natural Keys.

Billings

TRIPLA Time is measur'd by odd Numbers, as 3, 6, 9, &c. each Bar including either three Semibreves, three Minims, three Crotchets, or three Quavers, two of which must be sung or play'd with the Hand down, and one up, so that you are just as long again down as up. The first and Slowest Mood is called three to two, each Bar including three Minims, or one pointed Semibreve which are perform'd in the same Time as three Crotchets in Adagio. Two Beats down, and one up, mark'd thus 3/2.

Billings

By Flats the *Mi* is Driven Round,
Till forc'd in B, to stand its
Ground.

By Sharps the *Mi*'s led through
the Keys,
Till brought home to its Native
Place.

On the other hand, in a number of places Billings's introduction diverges significantly from Tans'ur. For example, there is no equivalent in Tans'ur

for Billings's "Thoughts on music,"²² and in place of Tans'ur's long chapter "Containing some General RULES of Composition," Billings offers a section addressed "To all Musical Practitioners" in which he makes his oft-quoted statements about his not being

¹⁹Tans'ur, RMC, Bk. I, 18; Billings, NEPS, in WBI, 26-27.

²⁰Tans'ur, RMC, 16-17; Billings, NEPS, in WBI, 25.

²¹Tans'ur, RMC, 20; Billings, NEPS, in WBI, 14.

²²Billings, NEPS, in WBI, 30-31.

"confin'd to any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me," and "it is best for every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*."²³

So far as the music itself is concerned, Tans'ur's influence on Billings is generally acknowledged—although rarely easy to prove. Barbour, for example, points out many similarities in melody, rhythm, harmony, counterpoint, and text-setting, but he never makes the claim that any specific tune served Billings as a model.²⁴ McKay and Crawford are similarly circumspect in assessing Tans'ur's impact on Billings, employing comparisons of similar passages more often to demonstrate Billings's superior musicality than to suggest a direct connection.²⁵ All seem to suggest that while Billings knew Tans'ur's corpus of psalm-tunes and anthems and may have drawn an initial impetus from them, he was too gifted a musician to copy them closely.

In only one area, that of the Fuging tune, can it be claimed that Tans'ur's influence on Billings was so direct as to be immediately and easily demonstrable. Tans'ur introduced a specific type of fuging tune in his *The Royal Melody Compleat* that Billings seems to have adopted wholeheartedly. On the title page of his tunebook, Tans'ur called these "Fuging Chorus's," and noted that they "may be omitted, where *Voices* can't be had to perform them according to *Art*."²⁶ The Tans'ur-style fuging chorus was thus a polyphonic coda to a psalm tune, usually repeating the final two stanzas of text, which could be performed or omitted at the pleasure of the performers without affecting the utility of the psalm-tune.²⁷

Billings adopted Tans'ur's fuging chorus in the large majority of his fuging tunes. Of the forty-three fuging tunes which Billings composed during his

career, twenty-eight are of the fuging-chorus variety, while only fifteen are integrated.²⁸ The influence of Tans'ur is most obvious in Billings's early fuging-tunes, published in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*. A comparison, for example, of Tans'ur's GUILFORD with Billings's TAUNTON shows several important traits in common.

First, the fuging section is quite short—nine measures in Tans'ur, sixteen measures in Billings. Second, verbal conflict resulting from the fugal entries is resolved almost immediately after the entry of the final voice. Third, the fugal motive is repeated at the unison or octave in all voices.²⁹ And finally, an expressive melisma is placed on the first accented syllable in the final line of text. While one cannot claim that Billings used GUILFORD or any other Tans'ur fuging-tune as a model, one can suggest that Billings based his early fugal style on Tans'ur's procedures.

Billings soon moved beyond Tans'ur's rather limited fugal technique. EUROPE, in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*,³⁰ already represents an advance and LANESBOROUGH, published in John Stickney's *The Gentleman and Lady's Musical Companion*,³¹ shows almost none of Tans'ur's fugal style beyond the fuging-chorus form. By 1778, when he issued *The Singing Master's Assistant*, Billings had developed a fugal style of considerable power, variety, and imagination, retaining only Tans'ur's fuging chorus as an indicator of its roots.

Billings and Tans'ur both set the same or similar texts in four anthems: "I Will Love Thee" (Psalm 18), "Sing Ye Merrily" (Psalm 81), "They That Go Down To The Sea" (Psalm 107), and "O Praise The

²³ Billings, NEPS, in WBI, 32-33.

²⁴ Barbour, *passim*.

²⁵ See, for example, the discussion of Tans'ur's and Billings's settings of Psalm 107 ("They that go down to the sea"), in McKay and Crawford, 113-114.

²⁶ Tans'ur, RMC, p. 13.

²⁷ In my unpublished study, "The Fuging-Tune Revisited", presented at the national meeting of the American Musicological Society in 1976, I noted that of 117 fuging-tunes published in British tunebooks between 1749 and 1760, only seven were of the fuging-chorus type, and all of these appeared in RMC. The other 110 fuging tunes are of the integrated type, in which the fuge is an inseparable part. See also Nicholas Temperley and Charles G. Manns, *Fuging Tunes in the Eighteenth Century* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1983), 12-22.

²⁸ In GUILFORD, only the tenor, counter, and treble participate in the fuge; the bass enters simultaneously with the tenor and provides free counterpoint. In TAUNTON, all voices are fugal. In GUILFORD, the period between fugal entries is five quarter-note beats; in TAUNTON, it is six half-note beats, which accounts for the latter's greater length.

²⁹ WBI, 317-319.

³⁰ LANESBOROUGH appears anonymously in Stickney's tunebook, which was published in Newburyport, Massachusetts, by Daniel Bayley in 1774. Billings issued an almost unaltered reprint of the tune in *The Suffolk Harmony* (Boston: Norman, 1786), 17-19, as NORTHBOROUGH. While he retained the unison or octave fugal entries, almost all other aspects of the fuge no longer show a reliance on Tans'ur's procedures.



Treble
Counter
Tenor
Bass

[Have Mer - cy on us, Lord, And grant to us thy Grace; To shew to us do thou ac - cord, The Bright - ness of thy Face.] To shew to us, To shew to us do thou ac - cord, to shew to us do thou ac - cord, the Bright ness of thy Face.

Example 1. William Tans'ur, GUILFORD, RMC, Book II, 90-91

Lord Of Heaven" (Psalm 148).³² While there are general points of similarity between the anthems, and Billings probably knew Tans'ur's settings very well, one can point to little that suggests a reliance on Tans'ur as a model.³³ If anything, Billings's anthems serve to demonstrate his keen musical imagi-

³²Tans'ur, RMC, 164, 178, 214, and 237 respectively. Psalm 18 is set in Billings's anthem, DELIVERANCE (CH, 131); Psalm 81 in "An Anthem Psalm 81" in SMA (WBII, 184); Psalm 107 in EUROCLYDON in PSA (WBIII, 71), and Psalm 148 in "An Anthem for Thanksgiving" (CH, 35).

³³Even in the five anthems in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings seems to have outstripped Tans'ur in such areas as rhythm, melody, counterpoint, and musical imagination, in spite of the fact that at this early stage of his career Billings could not set an unmetred prose text in such a way as to coordinate musical and textual accents. The only general traits that Billings and Tans'ur share in their anthems is that both tend to be highly sectionalized, a characteristic of parish-church anthems generally.

nation, while Tans'ur's, on the other hand, seem to point up his limitations.

Tans'ur's greatest influence on Billings and most other American psalmidists of the eighteenth century came in the area that Robert Stevenson called "praxis." The musical practice of Anglo-American psalmody was codified and passed on through the theoretical introductions of Tans'ur's tunebooks. There he described a method of musical composition admirably adapted to the unaccompanied choral music of the Anglo-American parish church and the slightly trained, semiamateur composers who wrote music for it.³⁴ Tans'ur included "Rules for Composition" in four publications: *A Compleat Melody* (London, 1734), *A New Musical Grammar* (London, 1746), *The Royal Melody Compleat* (London,

³⁴Parish-church composers in both England and America

Taunton—Billings

Treble
Counter
Tenor
Bass

As pants the Hart— for cool - ing streams, when heat - ed in the chace;
So longs my soul, O God, for Thee, And thy re - fresh - ing Grace.

So longs my soul, so longs my
So longs my Soul, O God, for Thee, so longs my
So longs my soul, O God, for Thee, so longs my soul,
Soul, O God, for Thee, And thy re - fresh - ing Grace.

Example II. Billings, TAUNTON, NEPS, in WBI, 185-187.

usually carried on other occupations than musical ones, e.g., Joseph Stephenson (1729-1810), one of the most talented of the British psalmodists, was a customs officer in Poole, Dorset, as well as the clerk at the Poole Unitarian Church. Others were schoolmasters, booksellers, farmers, or mechanics of one sort or another. Similarly, in America most composers of psalmody carried on other businesses to earn their livings, while the teach-

ing of singing schools, composing, and the compiling of tune-books were more often supplementary income than their prime occupation. For example, Billings was trained as a tanner and was apparently connected with the leather trade for much of his life. Daniel Read ran a store in New Haven, CT, and manufactured ivory combs; Oliver Holden ran a store in Charlestown, MA, and frequently worked as a carpenter



1755), and *The Elements of Musick display'd* (London, 1772). *A New Musical Grammar* and *The Elements of Musick display'd* are theoretical treatises, discussing in detail musical symbols, instruments, and compositional practice. *A Compleat Melody* and *The Royal Melody Compleat* are tunebooks with extensive theoretical introductions, but their coverage of the rules of composition is less detailed than in the treatises.³⁵

While Billings himself never revealed precisely the rules of composition he followed, he did indicate that his compositional procedures were not haphazard. In *The Continental Harmony*, responding to the "scholar's" question regarding rules of composition in the "Dialogue between Master and Scholar," he wrote:

Musical composition is a sort of something, which is much better felt than described, (at least by me) for if I was to attempt it, I should not know where to begin or where to leave off; therefore considering myself so unable to perform it, I shall not undertake the task; but in answer to your question, although I am not confined to rules prescribed by others, yet I come as near as I possibly can to a set of rules which I have carved out for myself.³⁶

Earlier, in the preface to *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings had indicated his familiarity with "several Author's [sic] Rules on Composition."³⁷ Compositional rules are found in several British tunebooks besides those of William Tans'ur mentioned earlier: Israel Holdroyd's *The Spiritual Man's Companion*, 5th ed. (London, 1753), John Arnold's *The Compleat Psalmist*, 5th ed. (London, 1761), and Caleb Ashworth's *A Collection of Tunes* (London, 1760). All of these depend to a large degree upon Tans'ur's rules, and it seems probable that they are the "several Author's" that Billings referred to in his statement. Since we know that Billings was familiar with William Tans'ur's *The Royal Melody*

Compleat, we will limit the discussion to that tunebook, even though it seems likely that Billings's knowledge was broader.

Tans'ur's "Rules for Composition" cover the basic contrapuntal motion between two musical parts (parallel, oblique, contrary)—as well as beginning and ending a composition, making cadences, and constructing a fugue. While these rules are presented in outline form in *The Royal Melody Compleat*, they seem sufficiently detailed for a talented novice, such as Billings was in the 1760s, to gain an understanding of simple counterpoint from them. Tans'ur's rules are as follows:

- Rule I. When one Part stands on a Sound, and another Part moves, the moving part may leap to any Sound that is Concord to the Standing Part.
- Rule II. Two Fifths, or two Eights, are not to be taken together neither rising nor falling, unless covered by a higher part; or one be the minor and the other the major fifth.
- Rule III. You may take as many Thirds, Fifths, or Eighths, as you please standing together.
- Rule IV. You may take as many Thirds, or Sixes, as you please, rising or falling, together, if one be the Minor, and the other the Major: but a Consecution of Majors are not in the Laws of Harmony.
- Rule V. When one Part ascends, and another Part descends, gradually, you must make a transition of quicker notes to bind in the Discords.
- Rule VI. When one Part moves upwards, and another Part moves downwards, both by Leaps, you may move to any Concord you please.
- Rule VII. When Discords are taken, they must take place by regular Transition, by way of Pass; or be bound in before Concords.
- Rule VIII. Whensoever you make a final close, or Conclusion, your Bass must always rise a Fourth or fall a Fifth, to end in the proper Key.
- Rule IX. Whensoever you would form a Fuge, first prick down your Point, or Portion of Fuging-Notes, to the Part you intend and then fill up your vacant Places with such Descant as is agreeable to your Point by the Rules of Composition.
- Rule X. Observe, that you never begin a composition with a Sixth; and let all Parts end in full Harmony in a proper Key.³⁸

³⁵Tans'ur's rules, as pointed out in the editor's introduction to WBIII, xxxix, were taken from John Playford's *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick*, 12th ed., Corrected and Amended by Mr. Henry Purcell (London, 1694), [135-194]. For a brief discussion of the sources of many of Tans'ur's theoretical ideas, see Jamie Croy Kassler, *The Science of Music in Britain, 1714-1830, a Catalogue of Writings, Lectures, and inventions*, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1979), 1000-1002. Kassler, however, does not mention Tans'ur's debt to Playford's publication and Henry Purcell.

³⁶CH, xxxi.

³⁷"To All Musical Practitioners," NEPS, in WBI, 32.

³⁸Tans'ur, RMC, 23-24.



Rules I, III, IV, and VI cover the basic contrapuntal motion between two voices. Rule I deals with oblique motions, saying that the moving part may move to any concord with the stationary part. Rule III deals with repeated notes in both parts. While this may seem obvious, Tans'ur may have felt clarification was necessary in view of the prohibitions in his Rule II. Rule IV covers parallel motion between parts in thirds and sixths, noting that parallel major thirds and sixths are against the rules of harmony. It is noteworthy that the rules do not mention similar motion between the parts where each voice moves with a different interval. Presumably movement to any consonant interval was permitted.¹⁹ Rule VI covers contrary motion by leap, allowing any concord, even one which in similar motion would produce parallel fifths or octaves.

Rules II and V are corollaries to the four rules of motion. Rule II relates to Rule IV by forbidding parallel motion in fifths or octaves "unless covered by a higher part; or one be the minor and the other the major fifth." The latter part of the rule is usual contrapuntal procedure; however, the permitting of parallel perfect intervals if covered by a higher part is unusual and noteworthy. It explains some of the contrapuntal transgressions that nineteenth-century writers found so egregious. Rule V covers contrary motion by step, noting that at some point in one of the lines the composer will have to use two quicker notes in one part in order to avoid a discord.

Rule VII deals with discords. Two types are permitted: passing tones ("regular Transition, by way of Pass"), and suspensions ("bound in before Concorde"). While suspensions are permitted, Tans'ur never demonstrated their use or construction in any of his treatises. This may explain why the suspension is conspicuously absent in Anglo-American psalmody. Tans'ur probably did not understand the technique involved in the preparation and resolution of the dissonance; thus he did not discuss it or employ it in his own compositions. The lack of an explanation or a model may have prevented its use by other psalmidists who relied upon his directions.

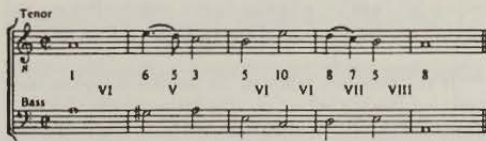
¹⁹In his *A Compleat Melody* (London, 1734), Tans'ur provides examples of "allowed" and "disallowed" passages (Rules VII–XIV, pp. 46–51). He appears to allow almost any similar motion in two parts that does not end in a unison, fifth, or octave. These examples are not found in RMC, and it seems unlikely that Billings knew *A Compleat Melody*.

Rule VIII deals with final cadences, saying that the piece must end in the proper key with a bass movement from the dominant to the tonic tones. This is the only harmonic prescription in Tans'ur's rules. Other than at the final cadence, the composer could move freely between chords as he pleased. This rule may explain the harmonically static passages and strange-sounding chord progressions that one occasionally comes across in Anglo-American psalmody. By implication, it seems probable that whatever was not specifically forbidden in the rules could be used.

Rule X is partially related to Rule VIII, saying that the composition should end "in full Harmony," by which Tans'ur seems to mean that, in three or more parts, some voices should end on tones other than the tonic. Rule X also directs that the composition not begin with a sixth between the bass and any other part. By ruling out the sixth, leaving only the third, fifth, and octave, Tans'ur insures that the opening chord is in root position.

Rule IX deals with fuges, saying that the composer should first lay out his point of imitation, then fill in the counterpoint by the rules of composition. This direction, as with many of the other rules, may seem somewhat obscure and inadequate when confronted on the page, but when used in connection with an example, the meaning was apparently clear enough to permit Billings and other Anglo-American psalmidists to create a significant body of expressive music.

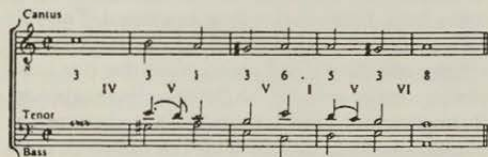
Tans'ur provided some simple musical examples with the rules in *The Royal Melody Compleat*, demonstrating their application. The first example, in two parts, designated "Tenor" and "Bass," employs contrary motion almost exclusively, with only one use of parallel motion (between the third and fourth bass notes). (Tans'ur supplied Arabic numerals to identify the intervals between the tenor and bass. I have furnished the Roman numerals in order to point out which of Tans'ur's rules the motion follows.)



Example III. William Tans'ur, RMC, Book I, 24. 2-Parts.

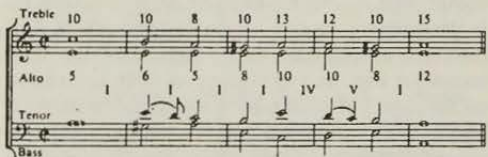
In the second example, Tans'ur retained the tenor and bass lines from the first example, adding to it

a third part, which he labeled "Cantus."⁴⁰ Again, the principal contrapuntal motion between the cantus and bass is contrary, while that between the cantus and tenor is parallel.



Example IV. Ibid. 3-Parts.

In the third example, Tans'ur extended his setting to four parts by retaining the original tenor and bass, transposing the cantus an octave higher to become the "Treble," and composing a new intermediate part, which he called "Alto."⁴¹ As can be observed, the new part frequently repeats the same pitch while the other parts move obliquely to it.



Example V. Ibid. 4-Parts.

Tans'ur's simple settings were obviously intended to be no more than exemplars of a method of composition. He demonstrated only the basic principles of combining melodies in two-, three-, and four-part consonant counterpoint. This was apparently sufficient, however, to unlock the secret entrance to the world of musical composition for hundreds of Anglo-American parish-church composers. From this foundation, the novice composer could study the musical praxis in Tans'ur's psalm-tunes and anthems, observing the application of the rules in various musical

⁴⁰In the dictionary following his theoretical introduction, Tans'ur defined "Cantus" as "The Treble, or highest Part." (Tans'ur, RMC, 26.) However, the numbers he supplied indicating the intervals above the bass show that the cantus, in three-part music, was an intermediate part operating mostly between the tenor melody and the bass.

⁴¹Throughout the introduction Tans'ur refers to this part as the "Counter-Tenor", and it is usually called the "Counter" by other psalmidists.

situations. Using Tans'ur and others as models, he could build his own compositional technique, employing melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and counterpoint which he found interesting, expressive, and meaningful. If he were talented and imaginative, as Billings was, the novice composer could forge an individual style of considerable dramatic power, which would permit him to compose substantial works of beauty and expressiveness.

While he demurred from a detailed discussion of his method of composition in *The Continental Harmony*, Billings did provide a general description of his procedures. He called the melody "a flight of fancy," noting that "when fancy gets upon the wing, she seems to despise all form, and scorns to be confined or limited by any formal prescriptions whatsoever."⁴² The melody, formed according to the composer's own desires and abilities, becomes the controlling force in the composition, for Billings goes on to note that:

the other parts are forced to comply and conform to that, by partaking of the same air [i.e., its melodic and rhythmic aspects], or, at least, as much of it as they can get: But by reason of this restraint, the last parts are seldom so good as the first; for the second part [the bass] is subservient to the first, and the third part [the treble] must conform to the first and second, and the fourth part [the counter or alto] must conform to the other three; therefore the grand difficulty in composition, is to preserve the air through each part separately, and yet cause them to harmonize with each other at the same time.⁴³

Billings felt that two parts were sufficient to make a satisfactory performance and recommended that if voices could not be found to sing the four parts satisfactorily, it would suffice to sing just the main melody and the bass.

If suitable voices cannot be had, to sing each part properly, some of the parts had better be omitted; for it is a maxim with me, that two parts well sung, are better than four parts indifferently sung; and I had rather hear four people sing well, than four hundred almost well.⁴⁴

The compositions of the Anglo-American psalmidists are sometimes found in two-part arrangements, consisting of only the tenor melody and the bass part. Indeed, Billings's only known holograph ap-

⁴²Billings, CH, xxxi.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Billings, SMA, in WBII, 18.



pears in this reduced format.⁴⁵ Between the tenor and bass voices Billings seems to follow Tans'ur's rules carefully and rarely makes a contrapuntal error, even during the early stage of his career when his technique was insecure.

Let us now observe how Billings applied Tans'ur's rules in one of his own compositions. BROOKFIELD was Billings's most popular psalm-tune during his day, appearing in at least eighty-eight printings between 1770 and 1810. Among American tunes of this era, it ranks as the fifth most popular, behind Lewis Edson's fugal-tunes, LENOX, GREENFIELD, and BRIDGWATER, and Oliver Brownson's VIRGINIA. It appears with at least eight different texts, indicating a wide adaptability to various religious sentiments, uncommon in other tunes of the period.⁴⁶ BROOKFIELD is unusual among psalm-tunes in that its final phrase is almost an exact repeat of the second phrase, giving the piece an ABCB' form.

In BROOKFIELD, as it appears in both the holograph and in the four-part setting Billings published in *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings uses mostly oblique motion between the melody and the bass. The next most prevalent movement between the voices is contrary motion. Both of these movements are designed to avoid contrapuntal problems, such as parallel octaves and fifths. The only transgression of Tans'ur's rules is found between measures 6 and 7 (marked below with a circled II) where parallel octaves occur.



Example VI. Billings, BROOKFIELD, WBI, 64, 2-Parts.

⁴⁵The holograph of BROOKFIELD is found on the flyleaf of William Tans'ur's *The Royal Melody Compleat*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1767) at the Library of Congress. It is reproduced in Nathan, *William Billings, Data and Documents* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), 21.

⁴⁶Richard Crawford, *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody* (Madison: A-R Editions, 1984), xxviii and 28.

When Billings added the treble to BROOKFIELD, he employed mostly repeated pitches and oblique motion with the bass. On the other hand, between the treble and tenor, the motion is most often contrary, again avoiding contrapuntal problems. At this early stage of his development, however, Billings was not a complete master of his technique, and parallel octaves occur in two places (marked by circled II's below) between the treble and bass.



Example VII. *Ibid.* 3-Parts.

Adding the counter voice to BROOKFIELD was largely a matter of supplying the pitches in the triads not covered by the other voices. Even so, Billings managed to construct a fairly tuneful melodic line, but one not wholly without error. The addition of the counter causes two more sets of parallel octaves and one set of parallel fifths (marked by circled II's below); however, in this case, the parallels are covered by an upper part, conforming to Tans'ur's Rule II. Even the parallel octaves between the tenor and bass mentioned above are covered in three and four parts by a higher voice, which mitigates their starkness and makes them contrapuntally acceptable under Tans'ur's rules. One can find little justification in the rules for the parallel triads between the second and third beats of measure 10, however, except to say that Billings did not observe Tans'ur's prohibitions there.⁴⁷



Example VIII. *Ibid.* 4-Parts.

⁴⁷In his revised reprint of BROOKFIELD in SMA (WBII, 48) Billings eliminates the parallel octaves between the counter and

The most conspicuous musical gesture in the melody of *BROOKFIELD* is the dotted-quarter, eighth, half-note figure on the first and second beats in the second and fourth phrases. This figure seems to represent the "air" of the melody which the other parts are to share. It is picked up in both the treble and counter as counterpoints to the main melody. Even the bass includes it once in the third phrase. In his revision of the setting published in *The Singing Master's Assistant*, Billings found several more places where he could insert the gesture into the musical fabric, giving the music a lilt and flow that ameliorates the starkness of its minor tonality and its basic note-against-note setting. Perhaps this was a reason for *BROOKFIELD*'s wide popularity during Billings's lifetime and after. It could be and was adapted to the sentiments of various hymns from meditations on Christ's passion to prayers for mercy and forgiveness.

William Billings's debt to William Tans'ur, in light of the evidence presented here, appears to be that of a student to a teacher. From Tans'ur he learned the fundamentals of his compositional craft. Tans'ur

bass in measures 7 and 10, but retains the parallel triads in measure 10 as well as the parallel octaves between treble and bass in measure 3 and between tenor and bass in measures 6 and 7.

provided methods, procedures, and possibly some models for Billings to follow, but Billings seems to have soon moved beyond Tans'ur's restricted aesthetic and musical perspective. By 1774 he no longer relied on Tans'ur's model for most aspects of his fugal tunes. By 1778 Billings's imagination had far surpassed Tans'ur in such areas as melodic construction, textural variety, dramatic settings of words, polyphonic independence, word painting, and most other musical elements that separate the talented from the pedestrian. Two elements of Tans'ur's practice that Billings did retain, however, are a preference for the fugal-chorus type of fugal tune and a musical praxis based on Tans'ur's rules for composition.

Billings developed considerable skill in counterpoint, and in some later compositions he seemed to be moving toward a more conventional harmonic language,⁴⁸ but he never abandoned the compositional procedures he learned in his youth from the study of William Tans'ur's writings and music. Even though he far outstripped Tans'ur in his command of the language and technique, Billings, by the fact that he continued to use Tans'ur's compositional methods, acknowledged his debt to that English singing master.

⁴⁸ See my discussion of "Billings's Three Musical Styles" in the "Introduction" of *WBIII*, particularly xlii-xliv.