

# Moravian Music 101

*(Long Form, with musical examples taken from a Moravian music sampler CD; any similar recordings of Moravian music can be used!)*

The Moravian musical tradition in America began with the earliest Moravian settlers in the first half of the eighteenth century. (Here I'm quoting from *Villages of the Lord*, by C. Daniel Crews; this is the most succinct and accurate description of the Moravians that I've ever seen.)

These Moravians were members of a well-established church -- officially called *Unitas Fratrum* or Unity of Brethren -- that by [the mid-eighteenth century] had already seen almost three centuries of rich experience of religious life. They were spiritual descendants of the Czech priest Jan Hus, who for his attempts at reform was martyred in 1415. Forty-two years later, in 1457, some of his followers founded a church body consecrated to following Christ in simplicity and dedicated living.

This newly constituted church developed a rich and orderly ecclesiastical life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but in the Thirty Years War of 1618-48 it was virtually wiped out. In the 1720's a few exiles of this religious heritage, along with various other seekers after truth, found refuge on an estate of a Saxon nobleman named Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. There in their village of Herrnhut the ancient church experienced a rebirth culminating in a spiritual blessing on 13 August 1727, in which their former diversity of purpose was welded into one.

In a brief five years, by 1732, that first little village of the Renewed Moravian Church began sending missionaries to all corners of the world. After establishing work in England, the Moravians sent colonists to America in 1735, but this initial settlement in Georgia proved unsuccessful, partly because of war between Protestant England and Catholic Spain to the south in Florida. More permanent work was established in Pennsylvania in 1741, with the town of Bethlehem as their chief center.

Other settlements in Pennsylvania followed, and the Moravians purchased 100,000 acres in North Carolina and settled at Bethabara in 1753, with the central town of Salem being founded in 1766.

From its very beginning the *Unitas Fratrum*, or Moravian Church, kept and preserved careful and meticulous records of church, community, and commercial life. Along with this emphasis on record-keeping, the Moravians maintained active communication with other Moravian centers in Europe and throughout the world. This dedication to sharing and receiving information continues today throughout the worldwide Moravian Unity, including Africa and the Caribbean.

Along with their rich devotional life and their missionary fervor, the Moravians maintained their high regard for education and their love of music as an essential part of life. Moravian composers -- also serving as teachers, pastors, and church administrators -- were well versed in the European Classical tradition, and wrote thousands of anthems, solo arias, duets, and the like for their worship services, for voices accompanied not only by organ but also by string

orchestras supplemented by woodwinds and brasses. In addition, these musicians copied thousands of works by the best-known and loved European composers of their day -- the Stamitzes, Haydn, Abel, Gyrowetz, Mozart, the Bach family, and many whose names have descended into relative obscurity. This rich collection of music manuscripts and early imprints comprises nearly 10,000 manuscripts and printed works, with some works appearing in several individual collections. The collections originating in North Carolina are housed in the Moravian Music Foundation headquarters in Winston-Salem, NC; those originating in Moravian centers in Pennsylvania and Ohio are housed in the Moravian Archives, Northern Province, in Bethlehem, PA.

The musical life in the Moravian settlements was rich and became respected by many in the young country. This musical life included sacred vocal music for worship services, including, of course, hymns; brass ensembles, especially trombones, serving specific sociological and liturgical functions; and instrumental ensemble music for recreation, ranging from works for unaccompanied solo instrument to symphonies and large oratorios.

### **Moravian Worship: The "Why" of Moravian Music**

A musicologist who knows nothing of the Moravian Church or of its theology and life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can, of course, analyze and certainly appreciate Moravian music. However, the more one knows of the Moravian Church, its life, and particularly its worship, the more adequate and helpful will be our appreciation and understanding of the music. After all, it was for use in Moravian worship services that almost all of the sacred vocal music was written. Fortunately, because of the Moravian penchant for recording the crucial factors in their lives, and for preserving these records in their archives, we have ample means of knowing in depth the context in which the early Moravian composers lived, wrote, and performed.

In the thought of Zinzendorf, and of the Moravians of his time, all of life was seen as "liturgical". That is, every aspect of life, even the most mundane, was a sort of worship to be offered to God, after the example of Christ himself. For this reason, such normally "secular" matters as beginning a new business or reaping the fields had a religious connotation. To give this ideal of life concrete expression, and to nurture the souls of those who would live it, practical realities naturally led to the development of various worship services and devotions which gave the Moravian communities a character of their own. Each day began and ended with worship, both in smaller groups within the community (divided by age and condition of life), and with the community as a whole.

A significant addition to Moravian worship materials was made with the introduction of the *Losungen*, or Daily Texts, in 1728. This could be a private devotional, but it assumed corporate congregational importance as well. From the time of the first printed Text Book (1731), Moravians throughout the world, whether in Germany, North America, or Africa, have used these texts as a daily devotional guide, either in private devotions or in the brief morning or evening services for the whole congregation or a specific part of it. There was, and remains, great comfort in the fact that wherever they are, Moravians are using the same texts as their Brothers and Sisters so far away.

One may also note that while the eighteenth-century *Losungen* were generally drawn from Scripture texts, they might also consist of a hymn stanza or a portion thereof. This was characteristic of the Moravian Church, for it was in its hymnody and music that it expressed its theology most frequently and visibly.

Zinzendorf himself encouraged the development of hymn singing, and in the early days of Herrnhut, when the community did not yet enjoy a large repertoire of hymns, he conducted singing classes in which not only the hymns, but something of the life and purpose of the author was learned. A large hymnal was produced in 1735, and many more texts were added in its numerous appendices. A slightly more manageable collection was made in 1754 and 1767, and in 1778 there appeared the extremely influential hymnbook of Christian Gregor, which remained in use among the German-speaking congregations for about a century. This contained 1750 hymns, 308 of them written or recast by Gregor himself. Gregor's procedure in compiling these hymns is also instructive: he often took familiar stanzas from originally different hymns, and put them together into one hymn, sometimes weaving them together with some new stanzas of his own.

Also in 1784, Gregor edited a *Choralbuch* which contained the most-frequently-used tunes for these hymns. In this book he “cleaned up” and added to a tune numbering system developed earlier in the century -- a system by which tunes of the same meter share a number and are distinguished from one another by a letter. For instance, all the “tune 22's” are long-meter tunes, with 8 syllables in each of their four lines. Tunes with the same number are interchangeable with regard to their meter, although the selection of which particular tune to use with which text is a choice requiring care and experience. The church bands still use this system today, with tunes called by number rather than by name.

Gregor's procedure of recombining and adding to the stanzas of hymns may sound a bit unusual. In fact, however, that was a very Moravian thing to do, and indeed this sort of approach, which combined new and old hymn stanzas in creative ways, was central to that most characteristic of Moravian services, the *Singstunde*. In a *Singstunde*, the person in charge selects with care individual stanzas from various hymns in such a manner that they will develop some Christian truth or theme as the singing progresses. In the 18th century, the congregation, which possessed an unusual command of the hymnal, would fall in with the leader before he reached the end of the first line of each stanza, singing by heart. No address was given on such occasions; none was needed. And even now, the first-line index to the *Moravian Book of Worship* includes first lines of all stanzas, not just the first.

### **“Categories” of Moravian Music**

The richest body of Moravian music, then, is that composed for worship. However, there are other aspects of the musical life of the American Moravians which should not be overlooked, and, in fact, which are particularly intriguing.

First must come what is most likely the best known aspect of Moravian music: the *trombone choirs*. Moravians have used brass ensembles and bands since their earliest years in Herrnhut to announce special events and to accompany singing at outdoor services and funerals. This custom seems odd to some people; recently a visitor to

Old Salem, upon hearing the band playing at a funeral, asked a guide, “How often do they re-enact this?” -- not at all recognizing this as a living service, not an historical re-enactment! The Easter Band for the sunrise service in Salem numbers some 400 band members, representing the 13 congregations of the Salem Congregation and a lot of what we might call “Easter Moravians” -- those who join the band for Easter, and then go back to their own churches! This tune, played by the Moravian Lower Brass ensemble, was written in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century by a Lutheran composer, and entered the Moravian world by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**MORAVIAN LOWER BRASS ENSEMBLE: *The Springs of Salvation*, sampler track 2**

Many Moravian chorales tend to be fairly stately and to have active parts for all four voices -- Moravians love to sing in parts, and one of the worst mistakes a visiting organist can make in a Moravian church is to play a free harmonization of a hymn without warning the congregation! Even the “average” Moravian congregation has people who sing all the parts.

Of course, hymns were a central part of the music of the Moravians 200 years ago, and they still are!. 200 years ago, Moravians had several hundred hymn stanzas memorized, and could sing them at the drop of a hat (or any other excuse). One of our Christmas favorites is *Once He Came in Blessing*, with its original text written by a bishop of the early Unity in Bohemia. The tune was composed by 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bethlehem Moravian musician – and founder of the Bethlehem Bach Choir – J. Frederick Wolle.

**HYMN: *Once He Came in Blessing*, sampler track 14**

The second type of music which we call “Moravian” is the “*secular*” *instrumental music* in our collections. This includes some music by Moravian composers, but by far the greater part of the instrumental music is not by Moravians, but by composers who were the most popular ones in Europe in the middle 18th century and later. Moravians seemed to have a voracious appetite for new music, and collected, purchased, and copied everything they could get their hands on. American Moravian music collections contain several thousand pieces, by composers as well known as Haydn, J. C. F. Bach, Karl Stamitz; and as little known as Pichl, Gyrowetz, Kleinknecht -- the list goes on and on. What the Moravians have in their instrumental collections, then, is a cross-section of the musical culture out of which the “masters” arose -- the cultural sea in which Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven were swimming. Many of these works are “only known surviving” copies.

Moravian contributions to the instrumental works, while fairly few in number, are significant. Delightful examples are David Moritz Michael’s woodwind *parthien*, or suites. These were written for outdoor performances in Bethlehem and Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

**DAVID MORITZ MICHAEL – *Parthia 6, Allegro assai* – sampler track 10**

There are also string works by Moravian composers. John Antes wrote a set of three string trios, which are lovely and challenging and have recently been recorded. Antes was born in Pennsylvania, and served the Moravian Church as a missionary in Egypt. In addition to the trios we have, he also wrote some string quartets which are missing. The truly international scope of the Moravian Church, then as well as now, can be seen in the story of these

quartets: here was an American -born missionary in Egypt, sending copies of his string quartets to an American diplomat in France, quartets which he had written for an English nobleman and his associates in India! This makes his dedication of the three trios to the Swedish ambassador in Constantinople almost an anti-climax!

Also by a Moravian composer are the six string quintets by Johann Friedrich Peter. These were written in Salem, NC, in 1789. Peter was probably our most gifted and accomplished composer, and in addition to these quintets he wrote nearly 100 vocal works.

### **JOHANN FRIEDRICH PETER – *Quintet #2, Presto assai* – sampler track 3**

But finally we come to the “other” aspect of Moravian music, the actual “heart and soul” of Moravian music -- the sacred vocal music, which was specifically written for worship services. Moravians wrote thousands of anthems, solos, and duets, for voices accompanied by chamber orchestra -- a rarity in colonial America! Moravians in Salem held the first celebration of July 4 in the country, in 1783, with a challenging music program assembled by Johann Friedrich Peter -- the *Psalm of Joy*. All the Moravian vocal music shares these characteristics:

1. They are based upon biblical or hymn texts, often the Daily Text assigned for the day of the first presentation of the work.
2. The voice parts tend to move all together, so that the words can be understood, rather than any imitative writing such as Bach would do. In this way the Moravians resemble Handel more than Bach.
3. They often have elaborate instrumental introductions and interludes, but when the voices are singing, the instrumental parts provide support rather than drawing attention away from the voices.
4. Thus they are straightforward, well-crafted works, like other Moravian arts and crafts.

Our example to listen to is an anthem written by Moravian composer and pastor Simon Peter, written for the Lenten season:

### **SIMON PETER: *O Anblick (O There's a Sight)* – sampler track 8**

What about later Moravian music? One of the most fascinating aspects of our musical heritage, especially here in Winston-Salem, is the result of two streams coming together: the Moravian musical heritage of fine instrumental playing, and the rise in popularity of brass bands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The result of this combination was the sophisticated and delightful music of the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Regimental Band of the Civil War. Their band books, in Moravian Music Foundation collections, are the only known complete set of band books of a Confederate band, and musical experts around the country have spoken very highly of the quality of this music. Let's listen to the familiar *Mocking Bird* quickstep:

### ***THE MOCKING BIRD* – sampler track 12**

#### **Researching This Music**

Suppose all that had been known of the music of Beethoven was the second symphony, the “Leonore #3” overture, two piano sonatas, and one of the late string quartets. Would you say that you “knew” the music of Beethoven?

This is, unfortunately, somewhat akin to the situation with regard to the music of the Moravians. I have said that Johann Friedrich Peter is probably the best of the American Moravian composers; yet less than half of his works are available in trustworthy modern editions. The situation is even worse with Johannes Herbst, who is known to have written some 300 compositions; less than one-fourth are available in good editions. We’ve only just begun – but a strong beginning has been made.

A good bit of music editing remains to be done. And once the bulk of a composer’s work has been edited, then we can begin to compare the works of several composers; and this indeed may help us to trace lines of influence -- something yet lacking in our knowledge.

A great deal of other research remains to be done as well. For instance, there are about 15 shelf boxes in the vault at our office, which say, “Salem Orchestra, 19th Century -- Uncataloged.” Our director, Nola Knouse, has leafed through these materials, and found them to be mostly the sort of piece we’d put on a pops concert today; but no one has done a study of the repertoire of the nineteenth-century “secular” music.

For anyone interested in hymnology, the field is wide open. Music in the home is another area needing much study. And there are seemingly countless anthems, solos, and instrumental works waiting for editing and study!

And before you ask, no, our catalog is not online. We hope to accomplish that within the next few years; so for now at least, you have to come see us to know what we have. I think you’ll find it an enjoyable visit!

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for the Moravians, music has always been seen as a necessity of life, not as a luxury. We’ve always used our music to express our faith, to communicate our faith, and to enjoy each other’s company. The Moravian tradition of the trombone choir continues today, with trombone choirs in various Moravian communities and in the church bands active in most Moravian congregations. The tradition of “secular” instrumental music continues in the Salem Band and other instrumental ensembles -- for example, in Winston-Salem, you can play in a different “amateur” group every night, and in most of these groups a large number of the players are Moravians. We just love to make music! And the sacred music tradition continues as well, both in preserving and sharing the “old” music and in writing new. Let’s end with an anthem, not by a Moravian composer, but one which the Moravians loved and saved, and which expresses the Moravian faith and love of good music:

**ERNST WILHELM WOLF: *Glory to Him Who Is the Resurrection*, sampler track 1**