

## MUSIC AND THE MYSTICS OF THE WISSAHICKON\*

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On June 24, 1694 the ship *Sara Maria Hopewell* dropped anchor in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Among its passengers was a group of 40 to 45 German Pietists and Mystics gathered under the leadership of one Magister Johannes Kelpius.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after their arrival they purchased 175 acres of land situated along the Wissahickon River in what is now Fairmont Park, Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> Because of this location, which was then virgin forest, and their ascetic life-style, these Pietists were popularly known as the "Mystics (or Hermits) of the Wissahickon," although they officially adopted the name "The Society of the Woman-in-the-Wilderness."

The importance of the Mystics to early American music rests on several facts: (1) they created the first German colony in the New World to emphasize music as an integral part of its religious life, (2) of their hymn compilations, one represents the earliest known musical manuscript created in the Provençe, and (3) within this manuscript are hymn arrangements that represent the earliest known practical examples of Baroque continuo realizations in mensural notation in either the New World or Europe.

Although the Mystics' contribution to early American music was important, it has never been thoroughly investigated. It is with the hope of rectifying this unfortunate neglect that the author has begun a study of the musical life of the Mystics, and any influence it might have had on neighboring communities. The present paper contains a brief outline of the initial fruits of this inquiry, representing the first phase of a

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continuing research project that will take several years to complete.

The first statement we have concerning the musical life of the Mystics comes from the diary of Johannes Kelpius which was begun during the trip to America. Discussing their religious life at sea, Kelpius observes, "Our exercises on board ship consisted in discourses of various kinds and interpretations of the scriptures in which those who felt inclined took part. We had also prayer meetings and sang hymns of praise and joy, several of us accompanying on instruments that we brought from London."<sup>3</sup>

We may observe three important facts in the above statement: (1) the singing of hymns had a place within the meetings of this Pietistic group, (2) instrumental accompaniment of this singing was apparently common, and (3) there appears to be a definite separation of meeting types. The distinction of meeting types seems to be significant as it occurs in other sources.<sup>4</sup> Apparently the Mystics regularly conducted two different types of services, i.e., a religious service emphasizing bible study at which music was not performed, and a prayer meeting service at which music was performed. In the former, one would expect the topic to consist of biblical scholarship, interpretation, and its possible mystical implications. The prohibiting of music at these meetings was probably due to the fact that it would tend to detract from intellectual argument. However, music would have been perfectly acceptable at prayer meetings, since it would heighten the emotional participation of the singers and, if the words for the hymns were written by members of the community, as was apparently the case at Wissahickon, the opportunity for deeply personal involvement would have been available. Such hymn singing corresponds perfectly to the use of hymns by the continental Pietists, who took great pride in their emphasis on the spiritual song.

The texts of these songs tended to emphasize the personal religious experience of the poets rather than the objective, scriptural character of the traditional Lutheran hymns and, not infrequently, leaned toward mysticism. There was an indulgence in Christ's death and its attendant agony and suf-

fering, and indulgence that in Europe strongly influenced the development of all Protestant church music at the time.<sup>5</sup> An example of this type of hymn may be found in the oldest known musical manuscript produced in Pennsylvania, a group of 12 hymns compiled under the typically affected title, "The Lamenting Voice of the Hidden Love at the Time When She Lay in Misery and Forsaken: and Oprest by the Multitude of Her Enemies."<sup>6</sup> At one time it was thought that this manuscript, various parts of which are dated at 1698 and 1706, and the hymn tunes in it were the creation of Johannes Kelpius. However, in a ground-breaking article of 1952, Albert G. Hess has called this belief into serious question. Although Hess has only placed under suspicion Kelpius' authorship of the poetry,<sup>7</sup> through painstaking research he has documented the European sources for all but three of the hymn tunes.<sup>8</sup> While it is possible that the undocumented hymns were composed by Kelpius or other members of the Mystics, the style of the music is so similar to that of the documented sources that a European origin must be strongly suspected.

It is not, however, the argument for Pennsylvanian or European composition of these hymns that makes this manuscript so significant; instead its importance lies in the musical arrangement of certain hymns. While some of the hymn settings simply present a single line melody, or a melody with basso continuo certain of the hymns also contain realizations of the continuo in mensural notation. These realizations are currently recognized as the earliest known practical examples of continuo realizations in mensural notation. This point alludes to the fact that German organists of the early and middle Baroque periods generally played from German organ tablature. For this reason, practical arrangements for organ in mensural notation from this period are quite rare. Only six sources are known, and none of these dates before 1706, the latest date found in the manuscript.

The existence of these arrangements circumstantially indicates the use of organs by the Mystics. In fact, there were apparently two organs within the Pietist circle. The most

important one, which probably came from London in 1694, is the one that was most likely used at the ordination of Justus Falckner as a minister in the Swedish Lutheran Church at the Swedish Gloria Dei Church on November 24, 1703. There is sufficient evidence to prove that the Gloria Dei Church had no organ of its own at that time, thus, the organ was undoubtedly supplied by the Mystics.<sup>9</sup> When the community disbanded this organ apparently became the property of Ludwig Sprogell, who had joined the group in 1700. Sprogell in turn sold the organ to Christ Church, Philadelphia in 1728, where it became the first organ of that historic congregation.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Christopher Witt, another survivor of Wissahickon, was the owner of a clavichord, a fact that opens up the question of just how many different instruments were to be found at Wissahickon. When all of the sources relating to instruments are consulted, six different types of instruments can be indentified: the organs and clavichord already mentioned, a viol, trombones, oboes, and kettledrums. They seem to have been brought from London in 1694, which means they would have been the instruments Kelpius refers to in his diary as having been used to accompany the singing of hymns at the shipboard prayer meetings.<sup>11</sup>

The existence of wind and string instruments, as well as the clavichord, immediately raises two questions, did the Mystics indulge in secular music and how closely did the Pennsylvania Pietists follow the musical practices of the continental German Pietists?

With regard to the first question there is absolutely no evidence to suggest the use of secular music at Wissahickon. While all of the above instruments had definite secular functions, all currently known references to their use identify only sacred employment. Therefore, any further speculation in this area must await the discovery of new information.

The second question presents musicologists with an intriguing problem. We know that the main musical outlet for the German Pietists was hymn singing. Instrumental music seems to have been frowned upon, at least the elaborate church orchestra music found in orthodox Lutheran churches.

However, it is quite likely that the German character would not have completely outlawed the use of instruments, and there is evidence to suggest that even non-ritualistic cantatas were permitted. We know, for instance, that J. S. Bach came face-to-face with Pietism at Mühlhausen when he became organist at St. Blasius' church. The Rector of this church was Johann Frohne, a strong Pietist who undoubtedly was the reason for Bach's leaving this post after only one year's service, the shortest tenure of his life. During this tenure Bach wrote no church cantatas for ritualistic purposes, although he did compose cantatas for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and civic festivities. He also performed all the typical functions expected of church organists, although his use of other instruments in the church service was sharply curtailed.

From the above information it would seem that the Pennsylvania Pietists were freer in their use of church orchestra instruments, since their use of them in church services is well documented. These services, however, represent special occasions, i.e., the consecration of a church and the ordination of a minister; consequently, we still are unsure of their roll in regular services.

The Mystics also practiced more than just the simple singing of hymns. Various sources identify them as being proficient in the singing of such chants as "De Profundis,"<sup>12</sup> "Veni Creator Spiritus,"<sup>13</sup> "Veni Sancto Spirit,"<sup>14</sup> and "Non Nobis Dominie."<sup>15</sup> Their use of these chants indicates that they were quiet familiar with the ritualistic music of the Lutheran church. Although they might have simply practiced such material for special occasions involving outsiders, their intoning of the "De Profundis" at the funeral of Johannes Kelpius in 1708 strongly indicates that their use of vocal music tended to go beyond that permitted by the Pietists of continental Europe, who, as mentioned earlier, permitted only the singing of simple hymns.<sup>16</sup>

At the beginning of this paper it was announced that a brief outline of the musical life of the "Mystics of the Wisahickon" would be presented, and that this presentation should be understood as the first phase of a continuing

research project. Much remains to be done, however, enough information has been compiled to prove the importance of music in the life of this Pennsylvania-German community. Once the current research project is completed a formal report will be made in the form of an extensive article containing complete documentary evidence. It is assumed that this future article will further enhance the significance of the Mystics in the development of music in colonial Pennsylvania.

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NOTES

1 *Church Music in Musical Life in Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. I, Publications of the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 9.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3 This translation is taken from *ibid.*, p. 11.

4 Julius Sachse, *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania, 1694-1708*, (Philadelphia, 1895), p. 71.

5 Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1941), p. 472.

6 The complete manuscript is reproduced in facsimile in *Church Music and Musical Life*, pp. 21-165.

7 Albert G. Hess, "Observations on The Lamenting Voice of the Hidden Love," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, V (Fall, 1952), 215-218.

8 *Ibid.*, 218-220.

9 In a letter posted by the Pastor of the Gloria Dei Church shortly after the ordination of Justus Falckner there is a definite statement that no organ was to be found in the church. For a translation of this letter see, *Church Music and Musical Life*, p. 197.

10 Julius Sachse, *Justus Falckner, Mystic and Scholar*, (Philadelphia, 1903), p. 64.

11 *Church Music and Musical Life*, p. 15.

12 Sachse, *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania*, p. 248.

13 Sachse, *Justus Falckner*, p. 64.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

16 See citation in footnote 12.

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### FULTS FAMILY SOUGHT

Seek info on ancestors and descendants of **Jacob** (b. 1801? in N.Y.) and **Sylphia Fults** (b. 1802? in N.Y.), who were residing in Theresa, N.Y. (Jefferson County) in 1850. Their children all born in New York: Warren (b. 1823?); George (b. 1825?); Mary (b. 1826?); Sara (b. 1930); John (b. 1832?); Philena (b. 1834?); Catherine (b. 1837?); Jacob (b. 1839?); Jane aka Lavina (b. 1844?). Contact: **Dr. Robert E. Ward, 21010 Mastick Rd., Cleveland, OH 44126.**