

Music as Recreation in a Small Town

From Hymnal to Hootenanny

by
Jack Vallesi

Music is a universal cultural tradition. It forms and reflects our experiences and emotions, always changing with tastes and advances in technology. New England generally, and Boylston in particular are no strangers to this occasionally discordant progression.

At the time of the first colonial homesteaders in what are now Boylston and Shrewsbury around the turn of the 18th century, music would have belonged chiefly to the household or the religious community. It was often sung *a capella*, which was music performed by a singer or group without instrumental accompaniment. Instruments such as pianos which had just been newly invented around 1700 were uncommon in our homes, being both expensive and difficult to transport and keep in working order, as well as being religiously controversial.

Because social and economic community was intrinsically tied to one's religious community, living outside easy access to a church was akin to banishing oneself. In colonial New England, a parish was deemed an absolutely necessary component before the General Court would grant approval for a township to be formed; hence no parish, no town. The early settlers of our area formed the Congregational Church of Shrewsbury in early 1700, followed by the North Parish Church in what is modern day Boylston in 1743. The settled areas throughout Massachusetts Bay Colony were dominated by Puritan Congregationalists, who had a marked emphasis on simplicity and textural clarity, allowing Psalms, however they were generally opposed to other artistic musical expression. The Psalms based on Holy Scripture were the inspired words of God.

They generally relied on oral tradition, so it was assumed the congregation knew the Psalms by heart.

The psalms were written into a metered, poetic format so that they could be sung, and there were standard tunes available that were matched up with various psalms. They were sung in a practice known as lining out, in which a designated leader would sing or chant a line and the congregation would repeat it.¹

Man-made hymnals as we know them today were not initially allowed. In 1752, the Reverend Ebenezer Morse who desired to have the psalms transcribed into musical notes for the congregation met with opposition by the congregation which desired the continuation of the lining out practice with the deacon singing the first lines.

However, even by the later 17th century, there were strong divides were forming. Locals were much less inclined to the religious activism that had driven their antecedents across the Atlantic, with music being at the forefront of the broad social changes. The appointment of a minister such as Reverend Eleazar Fairbanks who had a more liberal Calvinist approach introduced the Watts psalms and hymns for Congregational singing by 1781, making hymns and a choir a permanent part of Boylston's musical tradition.



Zither

Mahogany case

Gold decorations of eagle and scales

Donation by Dr. Karl Temple Benedict
Boylston Historical Society Museum Collection

With the social-musical barrier broken, Boylston residents became prolific musicians. The Smith parlor pump organ that adorns the museum today was purchased by the Brigham family in 1848 for \$325.00, no small expense. At this time, popular music was distributed as sheet music, which was the only way to convey the idea of an artistic remote performance prior to the invention of recording technology. Gathering to play music and to sing and dance became a common pastime and social activity, showing in the prominent places in the home occupied by instruments and the high degree of ornamentation of items like the organ and even the museum's gilded zither. These were performance pieces as well as ostentation.

¹ Morabita, Margaret, Church Historian, "Way Back When – Early Church Music 1600s-1796", First Congregational Church, Rindge, New Hampshire

Following the Civil War, the Boylston Brass Band enlisted no less than 2.5% of all Boylston residents, all men and boys. From there it can be inferred that many women were no less enthusiastic nor less adept, among them Henrietta Brigham Andrews, an organist and piano teacher. Musical theater, vaudeville, and even opera kept a steady stream of new music in the minds of all, and were performed at home by way of encore. Boylston's own Harry Souci was a vaudevillian of some note, and indeed performed in a Revue at the Boylston's Men's Club, now the Town House. And in the interlude between the height of John B. Gough's temperance preaching and the fever pitch of activism that led to the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1919, song and dance were the entertainment at Boylston's drinking establishments.



**Bass Drum
Boylston Brass Band
36" diameter
Built 1875**
*Donation by Arthur Flagg
Boylston Historical Society Museum Collection*

Although Edison's wax cylinder phonograph of the 1890s was the first means by which many Americans heard a recorded musical performance, it was the radio that truly revolutionized the way Americans listened to music, in the early 20th century. Despite their high cost, early radios were coveted items in every household. Like the ornamented organ, the museum's examples of early radios are presentation pieces, proudly displayed in rooms used for socializing. Driven by the scheduled nature of radio programming, many people regularly gathered to listen to their favorite genres or even singers, some of whom were contracted to specific shows or stations.



**S.D. & H.W. Smith American Organ of Boston
Acquired June 10th 1848**
*Donation by Henry H. Brigham
Boylston Historical Society Museum Collection*

Even as hummed tunes and psalms became brass bands and pipe organs, the character of Boylston's musical tradition remained in the small gatherings that served to express common joy. From the beginning, music was something to be done together, at every rung of the social ladder and in every sphere. Today, Boylston is of course home to many musicians and much music, a reflection of our common values with the residents of yesterday that sang in the same places and with the same purpose.

Acknowledgements

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