



Trav'ling Home

Program Notes

This is a concert program about a surprising and wonderful phenomenon: The vigorous survival, of folk-inspired religious hymnody in America.

Closely linked to earlier European and other practices, these pieces largely resist easy classification and are peculiar to this region of the New World. Neither 'ancient' nor 'modern', neither 'folklore' nor 'classical', they nonetheless offer vibrant reflections of a youthful society full of vigor. This repertoire consists (above all) of music for voices: single lines in the case of the Shaker songs, in two, three, or four vocal parts elsewhere. Each of these settings, employing straightforward texts and musical language intuited by non-professional musicians writing for non-professional use, speaks directly to the hearts and minds of the performers.

These pieces often link back to earlier musical styles, derived from oral traditions or from collections of hymns and carols originating in the British Isles. Recycled, distorted, these tunes became adopted into the customs of new communities. The power of these 'miniatures', often echoing musical practices, speaking with an artistic force emanating from their outward simplicity, is due in part to their autonomy from academic methods. The melody lines of the partsongs, most often notated in the tenor voice, were harmonized by amateur musicians such as William Billings (a tanner) or Jeremiah Ingalls (a tavern keeper). Angular, coarse, and rudimentary, full of 'mistakes' of part-writing and voice-leading, such pieces were anathema to the succeeding, conservatory-minded generations of composers in Boston who aspired to write music in the style of their European contemporaries: Mozart, Haydn, and Mendelssohn. And as for the Shakers who, living apart from the world, evolved their own system of "letteral" notation, their magnificent monodic creations remained, for the most part, utterly unknown to their fellow countrymen until the twentieth century.

Fortunately, the diluted musical tastes of the urban bourgeoisie never succeeded in permeating what is, after all, a very large, diverse, and free country. And even for those parts of the repertoire that have ceased to be current, the testimony of the old hymnbooks is there, and the music within is waiting to be sung again by performers both amateur and professional.

The present program draws on a number of sources: long out-of-print hymnals from the North, early manuscripts, and occasionally oral tradition. The songs and hymns are fascinating and important from a historical perspective, but most essentially, they are beautiful works of art, emanating from that which is best and truest in the American soul. The texts we sing frequently invoke the metaphor of life on the North American continent as a spiritual quest or journey. Such images were clearly very important in the early decades of our history; and despite the technologisation of American life, they still bear heavy meaning today. We are also reminded that these treasures are often to be found and experienced away from the mass markets, independent of both the academy and the music industry, and outside the official culture of our country.

This extraordinary body of song, celebrating love, peace, angst, yearning and community, represents what is best and, hopefully, most permanent in the American soul. As the United States

currently traverses a period of turmoil and crisis, may this music help us maintain and keep uppermost what is good and beautiful in the American dream.

Joel Cohen with Anne Azéma
1994-2018-2025

A SHORT PRODUCTION HISTORY

Early American music has been a part of The Boston Camerata's repertoire since the beginning of our recording history. It is with a vivid interest and joy that we have, over the years, included our own North American musical heritage in concerts and recordings. A recent Harmonia Mundi recording, titled *Free America! Songs of Resistance and Rebellion*, appeared in 2019.

First developed in 1994 for concert and 1996 for an Erato recording, *Trav'ling Home: American Spirituals 1770-1870* has been one of the most successful and touring programs of the ensemble. It has had many incarnations and revisions, sometimes focusing on one part of this repertoire -- say, Southern hymnals, or another -- including German and Scandinavian American sources. It has been invited to tour in Europe several times, and has often partnered with professional and amateur choirs alike on both side of the ocean. During our 70th Anniversary season, it seems important to return to this repertoire piece, and to take it once again abroad this coming July.