
Musical Themes from the History of Boston College

Jeremiah W. McGrann

,



contents

1.		1
2.		3
3.	, , ?	5
4.	: “ ”	8
5.		10
6.		13

Boston; during the Civil War, he wrote the words to “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” adapting them to an Irish folk song. A collection of his papers is in the Burns Library. Thanks to Gilmore, this fair netted \$30,728 for the school.

Music helped the school grow. By 1920, seven years after moving from the South End to the Heights and already feeling the need to expand out of the only teaching space, the Recitation Building (now Gasson Hall), a massive drive set a goal of two million dollars to add four new structures: a science building, a library, a gymnasium, and a student chapel. Eventually, only the first two were built, Devlin Hall and Bapst Library. Music figured prominently in the effort. Halfway through the drive, the renowned operetta composer Victor Herbert conducted an “All Star Concert” on May 8, 1921, in the Boston Arena for the Boston College Drive, earning “thousands of dollars,” as the Heights reported. At the same time, George M. Cohan, composer of “Over There” and “Give My Regards to Broadway,” donated the proceeds from an afternoon performance of his production of *The O’Brien Girl*.

11. It All Begins in Church

The Church of the Immaculate Conception was the center of musical life for the school in the South End. The church possessed a magnificent organ installed in the year of incorporation 1863 by the noted Boston firm of E. & G.G. Hook and, fittingly, the Society employed prominent artists from the Boston music scene both in the church and at the school. The first was John Henry Willcox (1827–1875). In 1866, while at Boston College, he and J.L. Southard published *Lyra Catholica*, a rare and significant American contribution to Catholic Church music in the nineteenth century. Willcox's music remained popular at Boston College long after his death; the choir sang selections of his vesper settings at the baccalaureate service in 1894, and a handwritten set of Willcox's hymns, nicely bound and copied on music paper specially made for Boston College, was found in the Church of the Immaculate Conception and salvaged before its closing.

The equally prominent George Elbridge Whiting (1840–1923) succeeded Willcox. He taught organ at New England Conservatory, wrote an important treatise titled *Organ Accompaniment* incorporating many examples from the Catholic sacred tradition, and was one of the few American composers of his time to set the Mass texts with full orchestra. For the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1888, Whiting rescored his Mass No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 4, for performance at the Immaculate Conception with the Hook organ; he repeated the work in the church the following year at Easter with a full orchestra. Clearly an admirer of Robert Fulton, S.J. (president 1870–80 and 1888–91), Whiting in 1879 published settings of "Asperges Me" and "Veni Creator" dedicated to the school's charismatic leader. For years, Whiting would conduct the vesper service at graduation and his name would be associated with a number of grand celebrations held at the church and the college.

Boston College and its graduates helped to shape the tradition of sacred music in Boston and the United States. In the late 1870s, two young men walked the halls of the school in the South End: William Henry O'Connell '81 and James Alfred Reilly '78. O'Connell would become the second archbishop of Boston in 1907 and, until his death in 1944, was a loyal son of Boston College, supporting it in numerous ways, particularly in aiding Thomas Gasson, S.J. (president 1907–1914), to acquire the

The activities of the Society and its members extended beyond the church and liturgical music. Fr. Callanan mentions informal, popular quartets including his own “Glycophonic Glee Club.” He also reveals the rich repertory of the St. Cecilia Society, mentioning a concert in 1870 with choirs by Handel, Weber, Verdi, Rossini, and Gounod—a standard of high quality maintained by succeeding choral organizations at Boston College. Outside the school, students from Boston College participated in Gilmore’s Grand Peace Jubilee of 1872, where the bandmaster assembled 3500 voices from the city’s various choirs, but where one Boston College student, Tom Kane, a “genuine Irishman,” refused to sing “God Save the Queen” on the English Day of the Jubilee.

Music also marked the end of the school year. A series of scientific and literary “Exhibitions” highlighted commencement week, incorporating music both as entertainment and object of study. Catalogues in the 1870s show the increasing participation of the St. Cecilia Society and an unidentified orchestra performing among the orations, disputations, poems, and valedictories. Music was itself a subject of the Scientific Exhibition in 1877, with presentations on the properties of sound and a demonstration of speech, songs, and cornet music transmitted by means of a new invention, the telephone! In 1881, the topic of the Scientific Evening was “Sound and Music,” with members of the graduating class discoursing on “Sound: Its Properties in Relation to Music” and “Music: Its Physical Theory.” Music was both art and science at the college.

As the school grew, so did the role of music. It is unclear when the school orchestra began. An orchestra, presumably hired, accompanied major celebrations from the beginning, but at graduation in 1885, the “College Orchestra” performed a grand polonaise entitled “Boston College.” Official mention of the student orchestra first appears in the catalogue of 1891–92: “The college orchestra was organized among the students in the year 1891–92. It furnishes instrumental music at the academic exercises through the year.” At that point, the orchestra consisted of eight violins, three cornets, one flute, one bass, one drum, and a pianist. The orchestra quickly embedded itself into the academic and cultural life at the school, providing music in 1892–93 as entr’actes for the plays *School for Scandal* and *Comedy of Errors*, for the Class of Humanities Academy, the Junior Exhibition, the commencement play *King Lear*, and

at commencement itself. The following year, the orchestra began an association it carried well into the next century by providing music at the proceedings of the Fulton Debating Society: an overture and finale began and ended the disputations, and the orchestra filled the time while the judges decided the winner and the prizes to be awarded. Besides church and schoolroom, music even filled the gymnasium. A letter to the editor of *Stylus* in 1884 refers to “the old time custom of choral singing in the gymnasium. Two or three years ago, scarcely a recreation would be allowed to pass without its complement of college songs. Those who could sing (and some of those who could not sing) would join in one grand chorus which was often powerful enough to make the restive small boy silent. And this was not without beneficial results. It used to give an inexplicable charm to the hours of recreation; and it always seemed to me, at least, to foster a feeling of kindness and good-fellowship among all the students.”

The 1890s were a rich period for music at Boston College. Two grand celebrations were held: on June 21, 1891, an “Academia Commemorating the Tercentenary of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga” presented orations, poems, an eulogium, and an ode interspersed with compositions by Gounod, Fauré, and Rossini, led by George Whiting with a chorus of 100 voices, men and boys. The following year, it was Christopher Columbus’s turn with a “Literary and Musical Celebration” on October 20, 1892, with choruses and overtures by the St. Cecilia Society and the College Orchestra. Commencement in 1891 highlighted the remarkable musical talents of one graduating senior, Pierce Grace. For his valedictory to the school, Mr. Grace composed *Academic Festival Overture*, Op. 7, an ode for chorus and orchestra titled *Carmen Triumphale*, and *Concert Overture*, Op. 4, performed by a chorus of 50 and orchestra of 50.

Changes were already occurring in music before the move to Chestnut Hill. At its founding, the St. Cecilia Society had featured a special quartet of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices (the higher voices provided by the boys of the preparatory divisions) to sing four-part settings of the liturgy. By the late 1880s, the quartet comprised only tenors and basses, indicating the growing separation in the activities of the high school and

lessons of an hour each are given to members of the Glee Club, including instructions in sight-reading and vocal culture. The Mandolin and Guitar Club meets three times a week when lessons of an hour each are given on the different instruments and, when needed, individual attention is shown the members. These organizations, besides giving an annual concert, furnish the music for the College celebrations held at the College hall during the scholastic year." The next year, "guitar" is replaced by "banjo" so that the group becomes the "Glee, Banjo, and Mandolin Club." There is little mention of the activities of this group before the banjos and mandolins disappear from the record, and by 1906–07, the listing for the Glee Club reads, "See St. Cecilia Society." Curiously, in the years from 1909 to 1913, the school catalogues list only the orchestra; both the St. Cecilia Society and the Glee Club are absent. Change was in the air.

1v. Interlude: "Tom"

The scene is the night of graduation, 1885: "...As it approached the noon of night there was a lull in the conversation—that unaccountable pause that will happen—the boys got up and the graduates grouping together sang 'Farewell.' Hurley's voice was never sweeter, or more pathetic than in his last song. The class cry, a clasping of hands, and they were gone." So ends a report in *Stylus* on graduation in 1885. Hurley of the sweet voice was Thomas J. Hurley, or simply "Tom" (in later references to him), but it was far from his last song. Among the loyal and true graduates of Boston College, Tom Hurley must rank at the front. He has no building named for him, but his lasting memorial, intangible as all music, is something that has united generations of graduates for 100 years—for T.J. Hurley composed both "Hail! Alma Mater!" and the ever-popular "For Boston."

He must have had a remarkable voice, as perhaps only a tenor with an Irish name such as Hurley could have. And while the touching scene of graduation in 1885 marked the end of one chapter, Tom keeps reappearing in the story of Boston College. As an undergraduate, he lived up to the school motto of "Ever to Excel," seeming to be everywhere: a member of

he sang in plays, and he composed a hymn, “Queen of Angels,” for the Academia celebrating the 300th anniversary of the foundation of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin in Jesuit institutions. This last celebration, on December 8, 1888, earned him another notice Stylus: “The greatest individual triumph was obtained by Thomas J. Hurley ’85, who had written the words, composed the music, and who then sang his hymn in that sweet and finished tenor of his that has been the gem of many a celebration in College and Church.” Outside the sphere of music, he helped organize the Boston College Athletic Club and led Company D as its captain in the second annual battalion drill; at graduation he took part in the prize declamation and won \$30 for the best English composition in the collegiate classes. He returned to pursue a master of arts, served as historian for the newly formed Alumni Association, was elected an honorary member of the St. Cecilia Society, and, when the Glee Club began in 1913, he served as their musical mentor early in their formative years. He provided his voice at numerous occasions in church and at alumni celebrations. One alumnus reminiscing of his compatriot wrote: “And Tom Hurley—well! Is there anyone who hasn’t heard of Tom, enjoyed his wit and humor, and listened to his sweet voice?”

“Hail! Alma Mater!” was Tom’s contribution in 1913 to the 50th anniversary of the founding of the school. In early sources it is subtitled “Alumni Song for the Golden Jubilee 1863–1913.” The origin of “For Boston” is less clear. It seems doubtful, as sometimes claimed, that it is the oldest college ght song and dates from 1885. With its present text, it cannot date before 1913 as the fourth line, “And the towers on the Heights reach to Heav’n’s own blue,” could only have been a prediction in 1885. There had been some trouble over the years in nding the school song. Stylus repeatedly called for submissions: rst in the fall of 1885 just after Hurley graduated; then again in April 1886; in March 1888 a competition o ered the prospective winner the complete works of Thackeray in half-calf binding; then an article in January 1895 chided that even Stonyhurst College had a popular school song—why not BC? As best can be determined, “For Boston” dates from between 1913 and 1919; in the latter year, the song, credited to Hurley, served as the nale in a “Musical” given at Jordan Hall by the Band and Glee Club.

Tom remained devoted to the Glee Club and its value in student

he was commended in Sub Turri for his tireless work directing thirty-some concerts throughout Boston for the Building Drive of 1921.

The three groups, Orchestra, Glee Club, and Band, established a yearly cycle of activities when they joined under the umbrella designation Musical Clubs around 1920. This institution would structure musical life on campus for the next 50 years. Always headed by a member of the Society of Jesus as faculty moderator, the groups had a professional director and a student board. The clubs were the college's cultural ambassadors to the broader community, singing and performing at various schools, churches, and civic organizations around Boston. The highlight of each year was the "Annual Home Concert," a tradition dating back to 1915, where the groups performed either in Jordan Hall or Symphony Hall for a grand gathering of colleagues, alumni, and friends.

In 1937, Boston College welcomed back alumnus Theodore Marier '34 as director of the combined clubs. Ted conducted the Glee Club, Orchestra, and Band until the suspension of student activities at the end of 1942 due to World War II and the absence of an adequate number of individuals to form the groups. He went on to found the Archdiocesan Choir School in Cambridge in 1963 and was a recognized expert on Gregorian chant. After World War II, Henry A. Callahan, S.J., worked as moderator to bring the organizations back to life. By 1946, another BC alumnus, Walter Mayo '23, returned to alma mater to direct all three groups until 1955.

Leadership of the various organizations split in the 1950s, with C. Alexander Peloquin bringing the Glee Club into an age of splendor. In 1962, eight years before the College of Arts & Sciences would enroll women, he transformed the all-male Glee Club into the co-ed University Chorale, admitting women from the professional schools of the University. The Chorale first performed in the centennial year, 1963. Dr. Peloquin brought the Glee Club and Chorale to national and international attention—performing on the radio and taking the group on European tours, where on August 13, 1961, members of the Glee Club found themselves on two different sides of a Berlin Wall that was being constructed in their midst. In 1970 and 1974, the Chorale hosted major performances at Lincoln Center in New York.

In the post-war period, Dr. Peloquin's counterpart in band was Peter Siragusa. The band marched in the St. Patrick's Day Parade in New

York, where it was judged best of its class, performed at Carnegie Hall, and made numerous trips with the football team, traveling as far away as the Mirage Bowl in Tokyo and to the miraculous game against Miami in 1984. In 1971, the band became “The Screaming Eagles Marching Band.”

Music has paralleled the development of the University. Under J. Donald Monan, S.J., and current President William P. Leahy, S.J., what had been a local all-male institution evolved into the modern international gathering place of students, scholars—and musicians. Music at Boston College today encompasses an enormous range of styles: the popular and vivacious Voices of Imani Gospel Choir, started by undergraduates in 1977 and led by Professor Hubert E. Walters from 1982 to 2010; and the variety of music presented by the numerous cultural clubs under Student Programs. The late 1980s witnessed a new burst of activity. For a while, each year marked the start of a new student a cappella group, though their ancestry goes back to the “Glycophonic Glee Club” in the 1870s up through the “Margols” (think school colors) of the late 1940s and early ’50s. Under the stewardship of J. Robert Barth, S.J., dean of the College

v1. Epilogue

There is one last connection that brings us back us to the original school in the South End and that far distant world of 1863, one last echo still to be heard. When the Church of the Immaculate Conception was closed in 2007, besides some books and sheets of music, another object was saved. The magnificent Hook organ, first installed in 1863, the year of incorporation, was dismantled with the intent and hope one day to reassemble it at the Heights. Thus, in ages to come the most concrete connection to the original Boston College will be the most intangible thing—music.

Jeremiah W. McGrann

Music Department, Boston College

With research assistance by

Jemima Victor '15 and Charles Stewart III '13

Funded by Undergraduate Research Fellowships

For a version of this article with citations, go to www.bc.edu/music.

