

Moravian Music ^[1]

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by John A. Hutcheson Jr., 2006



Image courtesy of the Moravian Church Archives, Bethlehem, PA.

^[2]Moravian music is one of North Carolina's most striking and significant contributions to the heritage of the fine arts in the United States. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [Salem](#) ^[3] and the other Moravian communities of the [Wachovia](#) ^[4] tract in modern [Forsyth County](#) ^[5] reached a level of musical composition and performance matched in North America only by that in the Moravian settlements in Pennsylvania.

Although a small body of secular music, particularly chamber music, exists by Moravian composers, most of their works were sacred in character, written to express or enhance the spirituality of these intensely devout communities. Music was an essential part of formal Moravian worship, but it was also used to punctuate the ordinary routines of communal life and commemorate special occasions. Births, deaths, marriages, worship services, and festivals were announced in a Moravian settlement through hymns or chorales played from the church steeple by a trombone ensemble. Congregational singing was an important part of nearly every service. Arias for soloists, choral anthems, and instrumental works were also in great demand. While some of these were taken from the works of non-[Moravians](#) ^[6], the large majority were written by a series of accomplished Moravian musicians, many of whom were ministers who considered themselves musical amateurs, between the mid-eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries.

In larger Moravian centers such as Salem, the *collegium musicum*, or civic orchestra, was dedicated to maintaining high musical standards through teaching, performance, instrument making, and music acquisition. The roots of the Moravian Church in both its original and renewed forms were sunk deep in Bohemia and Germany, some of the most musically fertile parts of Europe. Moravians in Saxony drew on both the rich musical heritage of German Protestantism and the proximity of many prominent composers of the late baroque, classical, and early romantic eras. Because the various Moravian groups in Europe, England, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina were in constant contact with each other, these composers' styles, techniques, and works spread rapidly throughout the Moravian community. As a result, the inhabitants of Salem in the revolutionary and early national eras sang, played, and sometimes wrote music similar to what might have been heard or written at the same time in Vienna, Prague, Leipzig, or London.

Three men with connections to Salem illustrate aspects of the town's musical life. [Johannes Herbst](#) ^[7] (1735-1812), a native of Swabia, served his church in Germany and England before coming to America in 1786, bringing with him a library of well over 1,000 choral and vocal works, mostly copied in his hand and including more than 300 compositions of his own. After many years in Pennsylvania, he was sent in 1811 to minister to the congregation at Salem. He died eight months later, leaving his great collection. [Johann Friedrich Peter](#) ^[8] (1746-1813) was born in Holland, arrived in Pennsylvania in 1770, and served as pastor in Salem from 1780 to 1790, where he composed, in addition to many anthems and solo songs, six string quintets which are the earliest-known chamber music written in America. Finally, [Edward William Leinbach](#) ^[9] (1823-1901), a native of Salem, was one of the relatively rare professional musicians among the Moravian composers. After study in Boston he returned home to life as a church organist, choirmaster, and teacher in the Salem Female Academy, in the course of which he composed a number of anthems and hymn tunes.

Leinbach reached maturity as the distinctions between the Moravians in Salem and the surrounding non-Moravian culture were diminishing. Existing only in manuscript copies, most Moravian music was never widely known outside Moravian circles, and by the time Leinbach died in 1901, much of it was forgotten. Still, thousands of pieces rested in the Moravian archives in Bethlehem, Pa., and [Winston-Salem](#) ^[10]. In 1950 the first [Moravian Music Festival](#) ^[11] began modern performance of these works, and in 1956 the [Moravian Music Foundation](#) ^[12] was established in Winston-Salem to foster research and publication in line with current scholarly and editorial standards.

References:

Donald M. McCorkle, *The Moravian Contribution to American Music* (1956).

Daniel B. Thorp, *The Moravian Community in Colonial North Carolina* (1989).

Image Credit:

Image courtesy of the Moravian Church Archives, Bethlehem, PA. Available from http://www.moravianchurcharchives.org/thismonth/12_02%20Johannes%20Herbst.pdf [13] (accessed June 12, 2012).

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Origin - location:

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