

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

“Our American Heritage” May 16, 2009

Of the many songs performed by the chorale in this concert, here are some notes on selected memorable composers who recognized the service of our Armed Forces.



George M. Cohan’s Medley: *Yankee Doodle Boy, Give My Regards to Broadway, You’re a Grand Old Flag*

George M. Cohan wrote these opening songs of our concert in 1904 and 1906. By then, he was a veteran vaudeville performer, composer, actor, and dancer at the age of 26. These showstopper American songs came to him naturally having been reared by a vaudeville Irish–Catholic family in Providence R.I who insisted he was born on the Fourth of July, which of course was pure hype. A leading member of Tin Pan Alley (a collection of music publishers and songwriters based in New York City at the turn of the 20th century), he was considered by many to be the father of the American musical comedy. For his patriotic songs, FDR awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal for his contributions to morale during WW I. An 8-foot high bronze statue of this multi-talented person stands at Time Square at the corner of Broadway and 46th Street. With the backing of the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II in 1959, an 8-foot high bronze statue of this multi-talented person stands at Time Square at the corner of Broadway and 46th Street honoring the man who passed away in 1942.

William Billings’ *Chester*

William Billings born in 1746 is considered the father of American choral music. *Chester* was one of the popular patriotic songs in the colonies during the American Revolution. Born in Boston in 1746 and a tanner by trade, he taught himself music. In 1770, he compiled his choral music in a collection entitled *The New- England Psalm Singer*. The song *Chester* was included. He refined the song in his 1778 collection *The Singing Master’s Assistant*. Do not look for meaning in the title “Chester.” Billings employed the practice of the day, which was to label songs with arbitrary place names so that the tunes could be sung with different lyrics to suite the need of the day. *Chester* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (a modified British Folk song) were the unofficial revolutionary anthems of our emerging new nation. Billings was a friend of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere. The latter a silversmith by trade engraved the frontispiece of his first book of songs. Most of Billings’ songs were written for four part choral harmony with the melody carried by the tenors rather than the sopranos. Duse to weak copyright laws, he never earned much money for his musical compositions and died penniless in 1800.



Notes on the Civil War Songs and Composers



Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye was actually a 19th century Irish folk song when Irish troops served with the British East India Company. This accounts for the reference to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in the lyrics. In 1863, Patrick Gilmore took the melody of this Irish song and set it to new lyrics with the Civil War variant called “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.”

Although the tune to the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* originated in the mid-19th century, the song was eventually cast in its Civil War mold by Julia Ward Howe, a strong supporter of the Union. She wrote it while staying at the Willard Hotel, just a half-block north of the

White House, on November 18, 1861. Howe had heard an earlier version of the song played while troops marched in the capital. Early in the morning, she penned the lyrics supporting the fighting Union soldier's cause, which have made this hymn a classic.

Irving Berlin's *A Century of Song*: Excerpts include: *This is the Army Mr. Jones*; *What'll I Do*; *Give me Your Tired, Your Poor*; *God Bless America*



Israel Isadore Baline (or Beilin) emigrated, at age four, with his Jewish parents, from the harsh Russian hinterland of Siberia. Struggling to survive in New York City following his father's death in 1896, he penned some song lyrics for a café in Chinatown where he worked as a singing waiter. The sheet music misprinted his name as "I. Berlin" and the name stuck. Amazingly, he composed the words and music to more than 1,000 songs. The lyrics came easily. Since he never learned to read music, he would hum his composition until he had it firmly in his mind, then hum it again to the arrangers he hired to set it on paper. Berlin entered the Army during World War I, and wrote and staged the musical revue *Yip Yip Yaphank* at Camp Upton on Long Island. The show initially contained *God Bless America*, but he decided not to use the song. Twenty years later, he did release it, with Kate Smith singing it on the radio on Armistice Day, 1938. Fiercely patriotic, Irving Berlin organized an all-soldier review during World War II called *This is the Army*. With a cast of 350 service personnel, the show toured Broadway, London, North Africa, and then Rome shortly after its liberation. President Truman awarded Berlin the Medal of Merit for his service. He was interred in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx after a rich, full life of 101 years. Forty-seven years earlier, George M. Cohan was buried in the same cemetery.

Program notes by Ted Cummings; edited by Nancy A. Edwards