

## Music Notes for November 9th

**Prelude:** Armand-Louis Couperin: *La Blanchet*

**Introit:** William Billings: *Morning Hymn*

**Anthem:** William Billings: *Creation*

**Offertory:** William Billings: *Mendom*

**Postlude:** Armand-Louis Couperin: *La Victoire*

Boston's William Billings (1746–1800) was America's first great choral composer. In spite of—or perhaps because of—his lack of musical education, he forged a uniquely American style, energetic, eccentric, and gloriously unencumbered by the strict formal rules of European compositional practice. An ardent Patriot, a friend of Sam Adams and Paul Revere, he delayed publication of his first book until it could be printed in America rather than England. His works include *Chester*, one of the two most popular patriotic songs of the Revolution (the other being *Yankee Doodle*), as well as a *Lamentation over Boston*, whose words begin "By the rivers of Watertown..."

Music was not a lucrative career in the eighteenth century. Billings neglected his paying job as a tanner, and despite his enormous popularity as a composer and teacher in New England's churches and singing-schools, he died in poverty.

In today's offertory, *Mendom*, a typically gloomy New England tune in the tenor contrasts with a sprightly descant in the soprano. The words are a hymn by the Universalist preacher John Rely. The other pieces, *Morning Hymn*, *Creation*, and *Assurance*, are "fuging tunes," in which the first section is homophonic and the second contrapuntal. All three set psalms and hymns by the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts.

Where's the choir? The quartet is providing vocal music for this service so that the choir may spend all of its time preparing for our service on November 16th, when we will be presenting Gabriel Fauré's magnificent *Requiem* with two guest soloists and an orchestra of over a dozen players! Don't miss it!

The prelude and postlude come from nearly the same time and from a figure in France of a similar bent. Armand-Louis Couperin was a cousin of François Couperin (called "Le Grande") and great nephew of Louis Couperin. He died just before the French Revolution began in 1789, and his harpsichord is a bit on the unusual side! While it is true to French Baroque form (unlike his contemporaries, who started to look towards the Classical forms developing in Germany and Austria), his harmonies are somewhat distorted and non-traditional, much like William Billings. It is not from his lack of formal training, though, and the two selections emphasize his florid and improvisational style of writing.

Thomas Dawkins, organist/choir director; notes on William Billings by Michael Lauer