

When the World Came to Town Influences on the Compositional Style of Ernst Immanuel Erbe (1854-1927)

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American choral music at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries is a topic that has received little scholarly attention. Although some historians have focused their attention on the choral works of Dudley Buck and Amy Beach, not one has addressed the music of Ernst Immanuel Erbe, a composer whose compositional career spanned two continents (Europe and North America), and whose style included an awareness of English anthems, *a cappella* German motets, Chorale settings, and liturgical settings.

These distinctions today could be classified as an anthem collection, although originally, the English anthem was always part of the church or chapel service. Wienandt and Young note that in America, the anthem took on a new definition where it was “any religious part-song that was more extended than a hymn.”¹ The American choral singer in the late eighteenth century and through the duration of the nineteenth century most likely would have been self-taught and sang “where no tradition of choral music had been developed.”² Some choral organizations, however in the Midwest had been long established, such as the St. Louis Choral Society, which was established in 1880 and is now what we know as the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Erbe would have likely encountered unskilled singers in his stops in Nebraska, Kentucky, and finally St. Louis, Missouri.

Ernst Erbe was born in Bern, Switzerland in 1854, studied in Niesky, Germany (a short distance from the Moravian cultural center of Herrnhut) and served various Moravian churches before immigrating to the United States in 1889, settling in St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis, at the time, was a cosmopolitan locale that served as the “gateway to the west” and the host of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, better known as the World’s Fair, and the Summer Olympics. Music was a large part of the Exposition, thus potentially exposing Erbe to different styles of music. While he might have been influenced by music at the World’s Fair and aware of progressive Romantic styles, I will argue that his compositional influences and style go far beyond the Fair and the Olympics and contributed to a conservative compositional approach.

Erbe’s compositional style, though conservative, is one that exhibits characteristics of a cultivated musical tradition that dominated the American musical landscape between 1865 and 1920 that emphasized European musical training. According to B. Jean Riegles, “It originated mainly in Boston during the mid-nineteenth century, spread to the major cities of the

¹ B. Jean Riegles, “The Choral Music of Amy Beach” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1996), 64.

² Elwyn A. Wienandt and Robert H. Young *The Anthem in England and America* (London: The Free Press, 1970), 194.

northeastern United States, and flourished among the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle and upper classes of American society.”³ Even though Riegles’s definition concerns only the northeast, one could argue that the cultivated tradition extended to large metropolitan areas of the United States, including St. Louis, Missouri, due to the waves of immigrants to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, due to the renewed interest in singing and music education as inspired by Lowell Mason, the cultivated tradition began to bridge gaps in other areas of the country.

Such bridges came in the form of publications from Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society as well as the Ohio publisher, Lorenz, which claimed in 1894 that it had distributed some 30,000 copies of its *Choir Leader*, *Choir Herald*, and later its *Volunteer Choir* magazines to the general public. The aims of these resources were to not only further church music and music education but also to provide volunteer choirs access to well-crafted compositions. In addition, immigration patterns, the growth of music societies and music festivals, and the establishment of music conservatories and colleges in America helped to propagate the cultivated tradition. Since an American artistic tradition was in its infancy, many turned to European trained immigrants for instruction and to visiting artists and orchestras from Europe.

Erbe, a European trained immigrant, settled in an area largely populated by German and other European immigrants where traditions influenced the art music. America was beginning to forge its musical identity with modernist and anti-modernist movements; Erbe’s music, however, does not reflect any modernist traditions, rather it is in a neo-Classical style reminiscent of Mozart and Haydn. His desire was to teach music, serve churches, and practice his compositional craft by creating better church music and educating the youth.

Several of Erbe’s compositions appear to emulate other composer’s works. While Erbe did not exactly reproduce other’s works, there are enough similarities to raise such a possibility.

Our first example is Erbe’s setting of the *Agnus dei*. A common practice in both Moravian settings and other composers’ settings was to begin with a vocal solo. In this work, the initial theme is first presented by the organ and then followed by solo soprano with the same melodic material. Please refer to example one. [*The handout of examples are included after the Bibliography.*]

In comparison to Franz Joseph Haydn’s (1732-1809) *Agnus dei* from his *Mass in D Minor* (“Lord Nelson”), Haydn begins with an extended introduction of nine measures (Erbe has eight measures of introduction) that presents the melodic motif before the entrance of the solo voice. In this work, the alto is the first solo voice. Please refer to example two.

In terms of harmonic rhythm, Erbe and Haydn are similar: Erbe changes harmonies every half bar while Haydn for the most part changes harmonies once a bar. In the course of eight measures, Erbe alternates between harmonies of I, ii, and IV with a half cadence (V) in measure eight to set up the entrance of the voice. Haydn on the other hand writes more “conservatively” primarily alternating between tonic and dominant. However, Haydn introduces several diminished seventh chords before settling on a dominant cadence before the entrance of the

³ Reigles, 39.

voice. Both composers are similar in that they create variety by utilizing chord inversions. After the entrance of the solo voice, Erbe's harmonic rhythm becomes even more similar to Haydn.

Seemingly, Erbe's compositional style is more progressive than Haydn's; although this may be true, one must keep in mind that Erbe was writing for his congregation focusing on smaller forms while Haydn wrote extended works for patrons. Erbe rarely modulated in a work; and when he did it was to a closely related key. In the *Agnus dei*, Erbe shifts between E-flat, B-flat, and G Major. In this instance, Erbe exhibits a Romantic notion of third movement, but refrains from chromaticism and an extended use of secondary dominants.

Shifting our focus from a European sphere of influence, we turn to the American reflection in Erbe's works. In some ways, Erbe's compositions reflect ideals from American anthems published after the American Revolution. According to Riegles, many publications from the singing-school movement in the northeast were "characteristically homophonic, direct, simple, [and] for the most part they were considered to lack variety and were derived from and influenced by models found in imported and American-published collections representing the musical style of the English parish church tradition."⁴ While Erbe's compositions were written in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, his music is, for the most part, homophonic, direct, and simple.

Some influential American composers Erbe may have been familiar with were Dudley Buck, Harry Rowe Shelley, and John Knowles Paine. Yet, even in such a musically progressive atmosphere, Erbe remained relatively conservative.

Dudley Buck (1839-1909), like Erbe wrote anthems for the quartet choir (i.e., SATB); unlike Erbe, however, he alternated between choral sections and organ interludes that were more virtuosic, thus using the organ to a fuller extent. "The organ parts often show a high degree of chromaticism and changes in texture."⁵ In Example 3, the choral parts along with the accompaniment illustrate Buck's use of chromaticism. Erbe rarely used chromaticism and his textures rarely changed. The most varying change in texture was the layering of imitative entries in his works. Erbe often used the organ as punctuation to move the choir from one part of the text to the next. Carol Traupmann-Carr writes: "These well-crafted works often have instrumental introductions, with somewhat more complex instrumental writing while the voices rest; instrumental interludes and concluding passages are also common. Thus, while the music is a vehicle for the message, the music is in no way seen as insignificant, nor is it simplistic,"⁶ but not as virtuosic as Buck's.

Erbe did share some compositional ideals with Harry Rowe Shelley (1858-1947) who wrote a fair amount of music for both *a cappella* and accompanied choir. Shelley's compositional style illustrates a significant departure from a consistent and elaborate organ accompaniment, relying mostly on choral sonority for effect.

⁴ Riegles, 65.

⁵ Riegles, 73.

⁶ Carol A. Traupmann-Carr, editor. *Pleasing for Our Use: David Tannenberg and the Organs of the Moravians*. (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2000), 20.

Example 4 demonstrates Shelley's interest in highlighting the choral sonority. The organ part largely reinforces the choir without being overtly virtuosic or taking attention away from the ensemble. Another similarity between Shelley and Erbe is that the choir moves largely in homophonic fashion. Erbe liked points of imitation, but for the most part, the bulk of his works are homophonic as evidenced by the following example from *Oh, Behold*, Op. 1. Similar to Shelley, the organ part does not get in the way of the vocal lines. While Shelley adds more rhythmic activity to the accompaniment, Erbe limits the rhythm to the lowest voice, the pedal. The interest lies in the voices. Erbe stresses the importance of the text and challenges the singers to highlight it appropriately. Shelley even adds a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* to highlight a particular word while Erbe focuses on the text as a whole. This is illustrated in example five.

In his strictly *a cappella* works (Op. 8) Erbe's choral sonority was preeminent. In *Herr, neige deine Ohren*, (EXAMPLE 6) the text is set homophonic. Again, Erbe's compositions follow Moravian principles where counterpoint is used judiciously as the textures are predominantly homophonic. The message of the text is the guiding principle as imitative writing obscures the texts. This is much like Shelley's setting, "The Spirit, in Our Hearts" where he sets his text homophonic.

Another individual who may have influenced Erbe in his compositional style was John Knowles Paine (1839-1906). A member of the Boston "cultivated tradition" of Amy Beach, George Chadwick, and Edward MacDowell, Paine was one of the first American composers to have his music premiered in Europe. In 1867, his *Mass in D Minor* premiered in Berlin. About the same time or shortly thereafter, Erbe entered a composition contest in Berlin. It is possible that he became acquainted with Paine's music and sought to emulate it. Like Erbe's setting of the *Kyrie*, Paine's setting incorporates a fugue with a rhythmic motive similar to what is found also in Mozart's *Requiem*. These motives are exhibited in examples seven through nine. However, Paine's setting is lengthy and sectionalized with a new melodic and rhythmic drive for each setting of the text: *Kyrie, Christe, Kyrie*. Material of the opening introduction returns at the end of the movement.

In the *Agnus dei* setting in Paine's *Mass*, the introduction does not introduce the melodic theme like Erbe's or Haydn's. The first thematic statement is with an alto solo. The voice parts, like Erbe's, are set homophonic. The "*miserere*" sections are similar in how the text is laid out with delayed entrances of the voices.

While Erbe was European trained and moved to America at the age of 35, he shied away from the spotlight and did not achieve the notoriety some other American composers received, perhaps due to his Moravian principles that taught one to not seek adulation. Again, Wienandt and Young state:

Two types of composers appeared on the American scene: the one who went to Europe—usually Germany—to be trained in the traditions of the masters, and the one who learned at home, usually less skillfully and in less depth than the one who spent his years abroad. The foreign student returned home as a student of composition, prepared to try works in the larger forms, both vocal and instrumental; the American product was more likely to limit his attempts to

keyboard works, solo songs, or short pieces for the church. In any case, he was less likely to be heard in places where criticism of his skills would be public.⁷

Erbe was an American composer who “stayed home” as his music was not widely known. His complete *oeuvre* contains keyboard works, some solo songs, and short pieces for the church. He wrote several cantatas but only one that was extended in length. His music was rarely heard beyond the walls of a church or a studio recital.

Erbe was certainly not focused on composing in a late-Romantic style, rather he remained neo-Classical in style with restrained orchestral accompaniments, rarely employing thematic transformations, or exploring Romantic harmony and melody, and expression. Homer Ulrich noted:

While most serious composers of the nineteenth century concentrated on instrumental music and opera, choral composition outside of the church did continue. These works took a variety of forms. Some remained Classical in style with traditional or restrained orchestral accompaniments; others contained elements of Romantic feeling in styles that departed only slightly from Classical ideals; and still others bore elements of full exploration of Romantic harmony, melody, and expression that had little relationship to earlier forms. . . [t]hey incorporated some late Romantic ideas of theme transformation and symphonic treatment and were rich in chromatic harmonies.⁸

Through it all, Erbe tried his hand at composing in several veins, but he sought to emulate “master composers.” The similarities between composers are too great to ignore. From his use of the rhythmic motive in his *Kyrie* to his setting of the *Agnus dei*, reminiscent of Haydn with possible American influences by Shelley and Paine, Erbe’s compositional style is closest to Shelley, a composer who featured homophonic textures with restrained organ accompaniment. Erbe and Shelley sought to keep the text in the forefront so that it might be clearly understood. Even though Erbe may have been familiar with other contemporaries, they possibly inspired him to stay in a neo-Classical idiom and not explore the relationship of Romantic harmony, thematic transformation, and fuller extended works.

Erbe kept his compositions clear, direct, and accessible for many ensembles. Even though the world came and visited his doorstep introducing him to new styles, he remained steadfast in his style of composition. Further research will only help to bolster his knowledge of compositions by Amy Beach and others as well as the complete influence of music presented at the 1904 World’s Fair. It is my hope that this paper will help stimulate further interest in the choral music of Ernst Erbe and the Moravian church and help fill a void in understanding American choral practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Until that is done, it is at least clear that Erbe adapted and shared in the culture that shaped the musical landscape of early twentieth-century America.

⁷ Wienandt and Young, 306.

⁸ Homer Ulrich, *A Survey of Choral Music* (Belmont: Schirmer/Thomas Learning, 1973).

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Presentation Handout

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“When the World Came to Town” Influences on the Compositional Style of Ernst Immanuel Erbe (1854-1927)

Timeline:

1854: Born, Bern, Switzerland

1867: Studies in Niesky, Germany

Ca. 1880: Organist for Moravian Church in Kleinwelka, Germany

1884: Assumes organist position at the Moravian Church in Ebersdorf, Germany

1889: Immigrates to United States of America and settles in St. Louis, Missouri

Organist for various churches within German Evangelical Synod of North America

1904: Louisiana Purchase Expedition (World’s Fair)

and Summer Olympics held in St. Louis, Missouri

1927: Dies, St. Louis, Missouri

Moderato

Ag - nus De - i, qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - di

Example 1: Ernst Erbe, *Agnus dei*, Op. 16, No. 2, mm. 1-6 & 9-13

Adagio

p

6

10

Solo

A - gnus De - i, qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - di,

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment in D minor, 3/4 time, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system continues the piano accompaniment, featuring a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. The third system introduces a vocal solo line in the treble clef, with the lyrics 'A - gnus De - i, qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - di,'. The piano accompaniment continues below the vocal line.

Example 2: Franz Joseph Haydn, “Agnus dei” from *Mass in D Minor* (*Missa in Angustiis* or “*Lord Nelson Mass*”) Hob. XXII:11, mm. 1-13

p *dim.* *pp*

hands..... si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed.

hands si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed. The i - vy

- ter with hands..... si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed. The i -

dim. *pp* *p*

kneel - eth the mas - ter with hands silent fold - ed.

p *pp* *mp*

The musical score features four vocal staves and piano accompaniment. The vocal lines are in D minor and contain the lyrics: 'hands..... si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed.', 'hands si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed. The i - vy', '- ter with hands..... si - lent fold - ed, si - lent fold - ed. The i -', and 'kneel - eth the mas - ter with hands silent fold - ed.'. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *dim.*, *pp*, and *mp*.

Example 3: Dudley Buck, use of chromaticism within *Hymn to Music*, mm. 20-25

SOPRANO

LO, Je-sus, who in-vites, Declares, I quick-ly come. Lord, e-ven

ALTO

Lo, Je-sus, who in-vites, Declares, I quick-ly come. Lord, e-ven

TENOR

LO, Je-sus, who in-vites, Declares, I quick-ly come. Lord, e-ven

BASS

Lo, Je-sus, who in-vites, Declares, I quick-ly come. Lord, e-ven

Example 4: Harry Rowe Shelley, “The Spirit, in Our Hearts,” mm. 34-38

S

A

T

B

Org.

Oh, be - hold, oh, be - hold, see the ta - ber - na - cle,

Oh, be - hold, oh, be - hold, see the ta - ber - na - cle,

Oh, be - hold, oh, be - hold, see the ta - ber - na - cle,

Oh, be - hold, oh, be - hold, see the ta - ber - na - cle,

for rehearsal assistance

Example 5: Ernst Erbe, *Oh, Behold*, Op. 1, mm. 8-15

45

S Knechts, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

A Knechts, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

T Knechts, denn nach dir, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

B Knechts, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

56

S mich, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

A mich, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et ver - lang - et

T mich, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

B mich, denn nach dir, Herr, ver - lang - et, ver - lang - et

Example 6: Ernst Erbe, *Herr, neige deine Ohren*, Op. 8, No. 3, mm. 48-63

Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son,

Example 7: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Rhythmic motive of *Kyrie* fugue from *Requiem*, K. 626, mm. 1-2

Treble.

Alto. *p* Ky - ri - e e = le = i - son, *mf* Ky = ri - e e = = le = i - son.

Tenor. *mf* Ky = ri - e e = le = i - son, *mf* Ky = ri - e e = = le = i - son.

Bass.

Example 8: John Knowles Paine, Rhythmic Motive of opening *Kyrie* from *Mass in D Minor*, Op. 10 mm. 14-17

mf

Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son

Example 9: Ernst Erbe, Rhythmic motive of *Kyrie*, Op. 16, No. 1, mm. 1-2