
Musical Themes from the History
of Boston College

BY

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BOSTON COLLEGE

CONTENTS

1.	HOW MUSIC BUILT BOSTON COLLEGE	1
2.	IT ALL BEGINS IN CHURCH	3
3.	CHORUS, ORCHESTRA, AND MANDOLINS?	5
4.	INTERLUDE: "TOM"	8
5.	THE HEIGHTS AND BEYOND	10
6.	EPILOGUE	13

1. How Music Built Boston College

It will not surprise those who know something of the Society of Jesus that music would be woven into the very fabric and throughout the long history of Boston College. The Society, since its founding in 1540, associated itself with some of the greatest sacred composers and performers of the age; it educated others through its system of schools and welcomed composers into the Society; members of the order authored scholarly and scientific treatises about music; and, most important for us, they carried music on their missions to the Far East and the Americas. The Jesuits have understood that music, whether as an object of creation or an object of reflection, remains a crucial means by which we experience the divine—"to find God in all things." And so in the mid-nineteenth century, this tradition came to Boston College. A hundred years later in 1958, a note, written by William Corey '59 in the program for the Boston College Annual Home Concert, reflected how this higher view of music filtered into the understanding of undergraduates: "We like music because we recognize in it something we have felt, or dreamed, or experienced. It is, in a sense, part of us reflected back by the delicate soul of an artist. His work is the mirror of a people, and into this mirror all nations of the earth may gaze, and in their gazing see the basic unity of human nature."

The story of music at Boston College begins before the opening of the school, for music, in fact, helped to build Boston College. In late 1860 or early 1861 with the Church of the Immaculate Conception and the school building completed in the South End, but as yet unused and heavily mortgaged, the remarkable John McElroy, S.J. (1782–1877), founder of the school, held two concerts in the as yet unconsecrated church to earn money. There is no mention of who performed or what they presented, but the concerts brought in much-needed cash.

Church fairs were another early means of financial support. The first, held in the Boston Music Hall (now the Orpheum Theatre in downtown Boston), lasted from April 5 to 16, 1863, just days after Governor John Andrew signed the charter for the school on April 1. A second fair, held in 1866, was scheduled to last three weeks but extended into a fourth and featured as its main draw the band of Patrick Gilmore. Gilmore (1829–1892), an Irish immigrant, was then the most popular bandmaster in

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*, then playing at the Tremont Theatre in Boston. Students also contributed. The Boston College Musical Clubs, comprising the band, glee club, and orchestra, performed with dogged application in and around Boston to add to the Building Fund, while other students wrote rousing “Songs for the B.C. Drive.” James G. Reardon ’23 retexted Gilmore’s “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” into: “The beauteous Heights are still quite bare, Bostonia / They need a score of buildings there, Bostonia / Come gather friends and help us out / With purse strings loose and heart strings stout. / That happy all may throng about / Thy spires, Bostonia.”

Music continues to meet the needs of the college. In 1981, the University Chorale used its Annual Home Concert to aid acquisitions for the library, and today the ever-popular annual *Pops on the Heights* concert, with the participation of the University Chorale and various student ensembles, carries on the tradition of music helping to fund the mission of the school.

II. 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 specifically 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

Lawrence estate where the college now stands. Cardinal O’Connell also composed and wrote the words and music for *The Holy Cross Hymnal* (named for the cathedral church in the South End) and a *Pilgrim’s Chorus* for the pilgrimage by Boston Catholics to Rome in 1925. James Alfred Reilly, after graduating from Boston College, entered Harvard Medical School and became a dentist; he wrote an article titled “Hygiene of the Mouth” for students at his alma mater. Active with church choirs throughout his life, in 1904 he served on the Church Music Commission formed by Cardinal O’Connell in response to Pope Pius X’s 1903 *Tra le sollecitudini*, reforming the use of music in the liturgy. In response to this reform, James Reilly co-founded the music-publishing firm of McLaughlin & Reilly, which became the major distributor and arbiter for Catholic sacred music. His influence extended beyond Boston onto the international stage through his publications and writings. In an article “Seventy Years of Changing Conditions and Their Effect on Catholic Church Choirs,” Reilly wrote: “American colleges will recognize music, and enable students to major in music in conjunction with their classical studies to receive an A.B....The development will mean more intelligent and cultured musicians, who will direct and demand better music.” Some 60 years before Boston College would issue such degrees in music, Reilly articulated what would be the distinctive philosophy guiding the study of music in the Catholic tradition of the liberal arts.

The name and music of C. Alexander Peloquin (1918–1997) still resounds with graduates of the college. For 38 years, from 1955 to 1992, Dr. Peloquin commanded the musical scene at the Heights as conductor and composer-in-residence. Just as James Reilly played a vital role in the identity of sacred music after 1900, so Dr. Peloquin occupied a major position in Catholic sacred music after Vatican II, creating important and popular works such as his *Gloria of the Bells* that spoke to the need for sacred music in a contemporary vein to connect with the modern congregation. In 1963, he composed his *Missa Domini* to celebrate the centennial of Boston College, while that same year he wrote his *Mass in English*, said to be the first setting of the liturgy in English inspired by Vatican II.

Boston College composers continue to reflect the school’s Catholic heritage. Current faculty Thomas Oboe Lee and Ralf Yusuf Gawlick, in works such as *Mass for the Holy Year 2000* (Lee, 2000) and *Quando il Fiume*

Giallo si acchiararà (*Frammenti ricciani*), based on the journals of the Jesuit missionary to China, Matteo Ricci (Gawlick, 2011), show the ongoing creative contributions to a tradition initiated with the founding of the school 150 years ago.

III. Chorus, Orchestra, and Mandolins?

The first surviving catalogue of the school, for the academic year 1868–69, lists music as one of the school’s three earliest student organizations: the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, a Debating Society, and the Society of St. Cecilia. Named for the patron saint of music, the “Cecilians” were to “supply the Music at the daily Mass, and give its aid, when needed, at celebrations, either of the college, or of the Church of the Immaculate Conception.” In 1868–69, one-third of the students at the school (39 of 114) belonged to the Society and lent their voices to the rituals that marked the academic year. Foremost was the Mass of the Holy Spirit, which consecrated the beginning of school, as it still does. But calendars well into the twentieth century specify that the first day of class began with a benediction preceded by chanting the ninth-century hymn “Veni Creator,” invoking the creative blessing of the Holy Spirit—“Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest, and in our hearts take up Thy rest.”

The liturgical year ordered the lives of the Cecilians and the routine of the school. Mass was sung every day before class with special attention paid to the *Tenebrae* services of Holy Week and to notable feasts such as those of St. Cecilia and St. Aloysius Gonzaga. The choir was so busy that *Stylus* (in its early days both a literary magazine and a newspaper) could quip in 1883: “Mid Lent is past and Holy Week is approaching. Woe unto the choirboys. They are in for it.” The Reverend Patrick H. Callanan ’77 reminisced for *Stylus* in the late 1890s of these early days: “I can say without fear of contradiction, that the *Tenebrae* services were magnificent during my time in Boston College. I took part in every service from ’70 to ’77 and sang in the St. Cecilia Society as soprano, alto, and basso. The chanting, the Miserere, the Benedictus, the Lamentations, and the special four-part music were all admirably rendered.”

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 choruses 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 the college. At the turn of the century, new groups appear: “The Glee and Mandolin, Guitar Clubs, organized in the year 1898–99, have for their object, the advancement of the students in the Art of Music. Twice a week,

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.

iv. 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 the St. Cecilia Society, on the music committee for his class association,

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 in *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 fight 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 finding *the* school song. *Stylus* repeatedly called for submissions: first in the fall of 1885 just after Hurley graduated; then again in April 1886; in March 1888 a competition offered 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 finale 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

formation, stating in 1927 at a banquet of the Musical Clubs “...there is probably no activity where discipline is more necessary than in a glee club.” Tom’s name appeared again in *The Heights* in 1951 when the Hurleys were the first to have members of their family attend Boston College for three generations. His lasting importance, though, occurs at every sporting event and whenever “For Boston” is sung—*The Heights* in January 1978: “But even more important than the words and their meaning is the enthusiasm it instills in students. The whole aura of excitement, togetherness, and pride that goes along with it is more valuable than a win or a loss.”

v. The Heights and Beyond

Boston College has been blessed with the students, faculty, and staff dedicated to music over the years. With the separation of the college from the high school and the move to Chestnut Hill, students stepped forward to take the lead. In 1913, Joseph H. Gildea '13 re-established the Glee Club. Its ancestor, the St. Cecilia Society, did not reform on the new campus. In 1981, Laetitia M. Blain of Campus Ministry would start the Liturgy Arts Group to refocus on music for the services on campus. In 1918, Carey Martin '21 led the advocacy to keep the band intact when, after World War I, the government reorganized the Student Army Training Corps into the Reserve Office Training Corps, intending to eliminate the S.A.T.C. band. Converted from its military role, the band quickly settled into its duties at athletic events—football in the fall, baseball in the spring—and special occasions, such as escorting Ferdinand Foch, Marshal of France and hero of World War I, when he arrived on campus to receive an honorary doctorate in 1921. In their early uniforms of maroon jackets with white hats and white trousers, the Band won “generous applause” and even astonishment when in 1926 they stopped before the cheering sections of their rivals, West Virginia and Holy Cross, and played the opposing schools’ college songs. In the fall of 1919, Walter L. Mayo entered the college from BC High School and immediately became the leader of a reinvigorated orchestra, his violin playing praised as a “revelation to the keenest musical ears in Boston.” Active also in Band and Glee Club, when he graduated in 1923

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 of Arts & Sciences, the Music Department was founded in 1988 by Ann Dhu McLucas and T. Frank Kennedy, S.J., and began awarding degrees in 1989. 1989 was also a banner year as Sebastian Bonaiuto assumed control of the band and expanded it into the Bands Program. BC bOp!, founded by David Healey ’90 in 1987, was the first of a number of additions, including the elite University Wind Ensemble. John Finney assumed the baton for the Chorale in 1992 and added the Boston College Symphony Orchestra to his duties in 1999. In recent years, the Music Department has added a Chamber Music Program, Opera Workshop, and groups for the performance of Baroque and earlier music, besides providing performance opportunities in improvisation and pop styles. Add to this the growth of the Irish Music Program under distinguished Sullivan Artist-in-Residence Séamus Connolly and his memorable Gaelic Roots Festivals and we complete, for now, the range of activity one can find on any one day at the Heights.

vi. 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.

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