

CHOIR SIZE, NOTES ON INDIVIDUAL VOCAL SECTIONS (CS)

n.d.: "Before the introduction of the viol and the flute and the worldly fiddle, 'the only instrumental music,' says the same writer [Rev. Theodore J. Holmes], 'came from the pitch-pipe in the hands of the leader, who [brackets in original→] [first pitched the key and then] marshaled his choir of seventy or eighty through all the old fugue meanderings of ancient harmony.'" [CT/East Hartford; Goodwin 1879, p. 131]

n.d.: "A chorister regularly appointed, named the tune after the psalm was read, sounded his pitch pipe, and uttered two or three notes immediately after. When he rose, the singers, forty or fifty sometimes in number, rose on the three sides of the house [in the gallery], and sang generally with great animation." [CT/Durham; Fowler 1866, p. 101]

n.d. (18th c., 1715 on): "Usually there were from six to twelve in the choir and these were led by such instruments as the trombone, clarionet and base viol." [ME/Eliot; Willis 1899, p. 102]

1768, 8 December, 14 December + 1775, 9 March + 1779: "...the reformers gradually won the day, and we find in December 8, 1768, the subject of singing was agitated, and at an adjourned meeting December 14, all those 'skilled in musick' were 'invited to sit in ye square pew in front of the pulpit.' Sixteen male voices either responded to the invitation, or were chosen by the parish. [new paragraph] Choirs seem to be a subject about which trouble never ends, for often at the parish meetings they were called upon to decide the momentous question,--whether those who 'assist and lead the church and congregation in the duty of singing praise' should sit in ye square pew in front or in a side pew, or in the gallery. On March 9, 1775, twenty-one men were chosen 'to pitch ye tune.' In all the music so far, the soprano part must have been weak in proportion, as in 1779, young women such as were skilled were invited to sit in ye front pews in the gallery, to assist in music." [MA/Byfield; Dummer 1888, p. 22]

1775, 9 March – see 1768, 8 December

1779 – see 1768, 8 December

n.d. (1790-1840s): "...[in the conference room of the fourth meetinghouse, built 1790] Mr. Lewis was accustomed to tune his bass viol in preparation for the service in which he was generally the only instrumentalist. Once in a while, however, the well-known Judge Butler, the eminent jurist, would assist in the music with his violin, of which he was considered a skilful player, and the large choir of forty voices combined with these players to make for the first church the reputation for good music, which the latter choirs have done so much to maintain." [CT/Norwalk; Weed] [1902], p. 42]

n.d. (between 1798 and 1846): “[Deacon Elijah F. Woodward, ca. 1787-1846]...entered the choir at the age of eleven, and remained there forty-eight years. Half of this period he was the leader, with voice and viol, of thirty or forty [p. 60] singers and players, among whom were five of his own children.” [MA/Newton; Newton 1890, pp. 59-60]

n.d. (early 19th c.): “The ‘choir’ connected with the town church in the early part of the century attained a wide reputation, not only for its size, numbering at times thirty or forty persons, but for the excellence of its performances. It had no superior, and perhaps no equal, in the north part of Worcester County, and its renderings on important public occasions were exceedingly attractive and meritorious, receiving many encomiums both from the general public and from experts in such matters. The same praiseworthy qualities have characterized to a greater or less extent its lineal successor, the choir of the First Parish, under the efficient leadership of George F. Miller, Harrison G. Whitney, and others. [new paragraph] The choirs of the other societies have also had a good name in the community, and at times have risen to a high standard of proficiency in the divine art of sacred song.” [MA/Westminster; Heywood 1893, p. 465]

n.d. (probably early 19th c.): “We find then, at the beginning of the second century of the existence of the church, the service of praise was sustained by a large choir, accompanied by wind and string instruments, usually a violin, flute, clarinet, bass viol and double bass, the two latter being the property of the society. ... [new paragraph] The choir consisted of thirty persons of both sexes, under the direction of a chorister, who was usually a tenor singer.” [NH/Concord; Carter 1881, p. 321]

n.d. (ca. 1805-1815): Mr. Nathaniel Shaw, from Abington, was a distinguished singer in his day. He it was who placed the voices on their appropriate parts. Before his day the air was sung by men’s voices, the tenor by the women, as it was regarded an immodest presumption for women to take the leading part. This, like almost every step of advance, was a point of difficulty, and occasioned much disturbance. Some men were unwilling to give up the air, and some women who had been accustomed to sing the tenor were unwilling to sing the air, and continued to sing the tenor during their musical lives. [MA/Randolph; Randolph 1881, p. 100 (from “History of the Psalms and Hymns and Music of the First Church of Randolph” by Rev. Asa Mann)]

1806, 20 November and throughout the 6 months before: “There was an educated lawyer in Topsfield, who, after he had, as he said, plead one thief clear, left his profession and took up that of writing and teaching music. His name was Jacob Kimball. He was a tall, portly man, not quite faultless in his habits, and was employed to teach six [p. 129] months, which [i.e., while] the brick [meeting] house was building, with a view to having a well-drilled class ready to sing at the dedication [which occurred on 20 November, 1806, when the writer, Samuel Preston, had just turned 14]. There were about half a dozen boys of nearly the same age, of whom Nathaniel Pope and myself alone now [in 1869] remain, who sang

counter. Music has taken many new names since then. Fa, sol, la, and mi, were all the names to notes that we knew in those days. Master Kimball had taken considerable pains to drill us for the dedication, as we had an important part to perform there. We were to sing on that day the old Selby anthem, 'Behold God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid,' in which there is a counter solo of some importance to the tune, and as it was to be the first time we ever sang in public. Mr. Kimball felt rather solicitous about our pluck, and I can see him now, partly turned around, for he had placed us near him, in his rear, his trembling hand beating time for us, while we performed the feat. I believe we did it to his entire satisfaction, as he called us 'brave boys,' when it was over. There was a good old lady present, one of the best-natured women in the world, the same who rode on the pillion [pillion: a cushion attached to the back of a saddle for an additional passenger]. She did not perhaps understand music very well, and in relating to her companions the incidents of the dedication she said: 'the singing was beautiful, but in singing one tune, they all got stopped but the boys;' [punctuation *sic*] and she thought they deserved a great deal of credit for carrying them through. Master Kimball wrote a piece of music expressly for the dedication. It was made applicable to the words of Dr. Watts'[s] 48th psalm, 2d part, short metre ["Far as thy name is known..."; in Kimball MS.?]. The words were perhaps better adapted to Solomon's Temple than to our new house, though that, for the place, was quite a noble structure, and was much praised at the time." [MA/Danvers; Preston/Danvers 1919, pp. 128-129]

1809 + 1822, August: "The names of forty-eight men are listed as [choir] members in 1809. It was not until August 1822, when the regulations were revised to provide for the expulsion of uncooperative persons and a fine of six cents for non-attendance at rehearsals, that the ladies were listed. At that time the roster was thirty-five men and nine women." [MA/South Hingham; Robinson 1980, p. 77]

n.d. (probably 1810s, if not before and after as well): "At the west end [of town], under the energetic leadership of Dea. Enoch Little [1763-1848], followed by [p. 298] Joseph Kimball and Samuel Little, musical culture had a rapid advance. ... The choir under Dea. Little numbered about sixty. David Sweatt, still living, remembers a meeting of the choir on Corser hill, and the singing of a select piece,-- [indented, smaller type:] 'Lord, what is man,--poor feeble man, / Born of the earth at first? / His life's a dream, an empty show [*recte* His life a shadow, light and vain], / Still hastening [hasting] to the dust.' [not indented, regular type:] It was the best singing he ever heard." [NH/Boscawen; Coffin 1878, pp. 297-298]

1815-1819: "'The whole front gallery [of the meetinghouse] was occupied by the choir, which in Sterling,' in 1815 to 1819, 'was very large and composed of some of the finest voices it has ever been my privilege to hear' [quoted from Joseph Allen's "history of the Worcester County Association"]. Another witness has said that a chorus of forty or fifty voices was not uncommon, accompanied by the violin, bass and double bass viols, clarinet, bassoon and bugle." [MA/Sterling; Sterling 1931a, p. 35]

1816, 30 October: “[At the ordination of Joseph Allen as Northborough’s minister,] [t]he church, then furnished with galleries on three sides, was filled in every part; and many could find no admittance. A large choir, consisting of as many as thirty or forty in all,--young women, dressed in a uniform of white, with white turbans and blue badges,--a well-drilled choir, under a skilled leader [Cephas Newhall], discoursed excellent music....” [MA/Northborough; Allen 1880, p. 12 (7th numbering, a sermon published in 1867)]

“In 1818 the Handel Society was organized, under the leadership of the eminent Dr. Eli Todd, and was invited by the society to conduct the service of song, which it did with great acceptance. [note: “This society was very numerous, and the members occupied all the seats in front of the pulpit; Dr. Todd having drawn the long and straggling line into a compact mass in the center of which he stood, animating and swaying all by his eye and his instrument [a violin].”]” [CT/Farmington; Porter 1873, p. 49]

before 1820: “George Bixby kept a singing-school in 1820, when new books and a new style of music were introduced, the parts assigned as at present [1941], the counter became alto, and the treble became tenor. Regarding this same counter, Mr. [Eben] Weston tells us: [new paragraph, smaller type:] **The air was always sung by male voices, also the counter**, except that Mrs. Hartwell [Mary Steward Hartwell, wife of Benjamin Hartwell?] sometimes sang it an octave lower than it was set. [new paragraph, regular type:] **The counter, I am told, was more like an obbligato accompaniment to the air than an alto part. Often it ran very high and was much elaborated. ‘It was so beautiful,’ said one who heard it as a child, ‘that it used to leave me breathless.’**” [ME/Skowhegan; Coburn 1941, vol. I, p. 327]

1820s-1835: “Josiah Todd then appeared as ‘singing master’ and ‘leader of the Congregational Church choir.’ This was not far from 1823. Dr. [Benjamin] Trumbull had passed away [in 1820] and the Rev. Mr. Boardman was in the desk. Choir singing was becoming more and more popular, and the choir already large at Mr. Trumbull’s death had increased to enormous proportions. [new paragraph] The entire gallery front of the old meeting-house was filled with these musicians. Their number was between seventy and eighty. The ‘women singers’ mainly occupied the long east gallery, and the tenors and basses ranged themselves on either wing.... [new paragraph] Josiah Todd’s choir came to be one of the most popular organizations. From 1825 to 1835 it was at flood tide. It embraced nearly all the young people of the First Society who could sing, and some who could not.... [new paragraph] A partial list of the choir of the Congregational church during the first half of this century is here named.... [p. 290] MEN SINGERS ABOUT THE YEAR 1800. / ... [6 names] / 1825-1835. / ... [34 names] / TREBLE SINGERS ABOUT THE YEAR 1800. / ... [3 names] / 1825-1835. / ... [44 names]” [CT/North Haven; Thorpe 1892, pp. 289-290]

n.d. (probably 1820s, 1830s, 1840s): “The choir consisted of thirty members.... Prominent among these at that time [?], or a little later, were... [named or

enumerated: 15 men or boys, at least 10 women or girls].” [MA/Brookline; Woods 1874, p. 256]

1822 – see 1809

“In 1824 the parish voted that twenty men who were specified by name be a permanent choir with power to elect their leader; but it was added, ‘you[r] com[mittee]^s however cannot forbear remarking that so far as has come to their knowledge Capt. Ira Stickney has the year past given the most pleasing satisfaction as a leader of the singing in publick.’ So Captain, afterwards Major, Stickney who was then only twenty-seven was already at the head of military and musical matters in the parish, and had that warm place in the hearts of his fellow-parishioners which he never lost. The vote continued that the choir have power to enlarge their number, but should use no instrument but a bass-viol—was a violin thought too frivolous? It was also voted ‘that those ladies who have of late sat in the singers Pew are [p. 185] respectfully invited to continue in the seats.’ If it had as many women as men the choir would be forty strong. Under its efficient chorister it must have led the service of public praise with noble effect.” [MA/Byfield (Byfield Parish of Newbury); Ewell 1904, pp. 184-185]

n.d. (probably late 1820s, 1830s; author of these reminiscences, John Eddy, was born 1819): “And what singing they did enjoy in those good old days, when a hundred voices were led by a bugle and a dozen other musical instruments!” [MA/Marlborough; Middleborough First Congregational Church 1895, p. 91]

n.d. (ca. 1831): “The singing of fifty years since was neither congregational, nor delegated to a quartette. It was the day of large choirs.” [MA/Lowell; Greene 1881, p. 239]

n.d. (1840s-1860s?): “The following is the list of the choir which sang in the old church [construction completed 1790] and also gave their service when the present church was erected [“in the late forties”—see p. 42]: [39 names, if there were two “Misses Durant”; 20 men, 19 women].” [CT/Norwalk; [Weed] [1902], p. 45]

1842: “The interest in church music continued unabated during the later years of occupancy of the old North Church, and when the new church was occupied in 1842, the choir filled the greater part of the gallery, which was finished for their accommodation.” [NH/Concord; Carter 1881, p. 321]