

Trombones and the Moravian Church

*The place of trombones in the practical and symbolic activities of the Moravian church in the USA is remarkable. At one level it is a story of continuity between the Bohemian origins of the Unitas Fratrum in the early eighteenth century, but at another it reveals something about the way that music has been used as an element to join the routines of ordinary life of religious communities to the central elements of their faith and liturgical practices. The really interesting thing here is the choice of trombones for this function: why trombones? Is it a tradition perpetuated merely by chance or is it because the sonic qualities of choirs of trombones make them appropriate for the accompaniment of Christian worship? It seems that the latter explanation is the case. Trombones were used in the original (early eighteenth-century) church, and this was almost certainly in imitation of the common practice in other churches of using groups including trombones in this way. There are two other important points of interest about this story: firstly that the tradition of using trombones continued in the Moravian diaspora after it died out in most parts of Europe, and secondly that the Moravian activities reveal an unusually long and robust tradition of amateur brass playing. Amateur brass playing did not really become a major activity elsewhere until well into the nineteenth century. The extract is taken from Trevor Herbert's book *The Trombone* (Yale University Press, 2006).*

The Moravian church stands alone in having an extensive and continuous tradition of amateur trombone playing from the eighteenth century to the present time; it provides a unique example of continuity of association between the instrument, a vernacular community and its sacred and secular rituals. The church can be traced to fifteenth-century Bohemia and Moravia and the followers of the radical Czech religious reformer Jan Hus, who was executed as a heretic in 1415. The more modern manifestation, the *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren), developed from a Protestant community that gained protection from Catholic persecution on the estate of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Bohemia in 1722. This community created the German town of Herrnhut, the first of many settlements formed throughout the world by Moravian communities.

Moravian religious values are distinctive, but based upon disarmingly simple ideals which have conditioned both community life and religious ritual, with musical practices being prominent in both. The basis of the Moravian musical tradition is choral, but musical instruments were used from the eighteenth century, and a rich musical culture developed that was central to Moravian life. Trumpets and horns are mentioned in early records, but the practice of using trombones appears to date from 1731. In May of that year at Berthelsdorf, the local pastor was serenaded on his birthday, when 'Songs [were] sung in the parsonage yard with the accompaniment of trombones'. At a funeral in June of the same year, 'There was singing...all with the accompaniment of trombones'.¹ Subsequent references to groups of trombones are encountered regularly. According to the *Lebenslauf* (memoir) of a congregation member, Herrnhut acquired a set of trombones in June 1731:

...we went to Herrnhut where we arrived in the evening after the *Singstunde* [song service]... There on this very day the congregation had gotten the first trombones, and so they welcomed us with them.ⁱⁱ

In 1764 the Synod of the Moravian church implied some official status for the trombone choir when it agreed that:

where there is a trombone choir, one can make use of it at burials. This makes a lovely impression of our hope on the hearts of the people.ⁱⁱⁱ

The players in the first trombone choir at Herrnhut were Hans Raschke, Joseph Seiffert and Daniel Johann Grimm. Raschke was the leader of the group and its teacher. None of these were professional musicians – Seiffert, for example, was in the linen trade.^{iv}

As new Moravian communities were set up in other parts of Germany, more trombone ensembles were formed. Brass (almost certainly trombone) groups were established in Marienborn and Niesky in 1742, Gnadenberg in 1743 and Herrnhag in 1747. By this time the Moravians had commenced a worldwide evangelical mission. They settled in Zeist in Holland in 1746 and Christiansfeld in Denmark in 1778, and both of these communities had trombone choirs. By 1790 there were ensembles in 15 European settlements.^v But from the musical point of view the most important and enduring Moravian communities were established in America. In 1747 the British parliament passed an Act which granted this ‘sober, quiet and industrious People’ permission to ‘settle in America [which] will be beneficial to the said Colonies’.^{vi} The largest and most thriving settlements were those in the east, particularly in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Nazareth and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Moravian communities believed that all worldly goods belonged to God. They held that there could be private property, but in practice the basis of their society was a sophisticated variant of communalism. They were mutually supportive and in many ways enlightened, but there was no clear demarcation between sacred and secular power. The homogeneity of their society was strictly ordered so that all aspects of life could function as a form of devotion. The community as a whole was the primary family unit, and stratification within that family was based on marital status, gender and age. The different sectors of the community were referred to, appropriately enough, as ‘choirs’; but while it seems that there were occasions when such choirs literally sang together as a unit, the word ‘choir’ was employed to signify a grouping within the society – a grouping that defined the basis of a particular ‘household’. Thus, for example, there was a widows’ house, a widowers’ house, a single brothers’ house and a single sisters’ house. Some female categories were even indicated by aspects of their dress.^{vii}

Because Moravians recognised no discernible limit to the opportunity for spirituality, all music-making – including that which took place outside the church – had a devotional quality. Singing was of prime importance, but there was also a wide variety of instrumental music. While trombone ensembles were not universal in the Moravian church, in the USA the *Posaunenchor* quickly became established as a characteristic feature of Moravian life. By 1754 the first trombone choir had been formed in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The earliest recorded use of the instruments in that town is found in a description of trombones playing ‘for the obsequies of a child’, whose remains were interred on 15 November of that year.^{viii} Further confirmation of

the establishment of the group by that time might be taken from a report that has high currency in the Moravian communities of Pennsylvania. On Christmas morning 1755 – so it is said – the trombone group played from the church tower to avert an attack by Indians who may have been coerced by French settlers. The story goes that intelligence of an attack reached the community through the agency of an Indian who was a Christian convert. Urged by their Bishop that ‘no one shall permit a hostile feeling against the Indians to arise within himself...but ...[shall] trust in the Lord our God’,^{ix} the Moravians resorted to prayer and the power of music. On Christmas morning the trombone group played from the church tower at 4 o’ clock. The time that the trombones played appears to be significant: it was exactly an hour earlier than the usual time for the community’s awakening. The sound of a trombone chorale mystified the Indians, who took it to be a sign of the Moravian’s spiritual protection, and fled. The Bethlehem community saw the event in somewhat similar terms and regarded it as a divine intervention. Of course, the story has more than a hint of the apocryphal about it, and there is little hard evidence to support its detail, but it holds strong in the town of Bethlehem to this day, and the unusually early (possibly unique) Christmas Day awakening is verified in the Diaries of the Bethlehem Congregation for that year:

Early in the morning this day, towards 4.00 o’ clock the birthday of the Saviour was proclaimed by trombones in a most pleasing manner.^x

Perhaps the most we can conclude from this is that by 1755 the trombone choir tradition was established in the town, but the willingness of the community to absorb the story into its vernacular heritage may attest to an equally important point: that the trombone choir was seen as a potent ingredient in its quest for spirituality.^{xi}

The *Posaunenchor* was usually four in number (though some groups were larger), and was made up of instruments that matched the soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices. At various points in their history, communities may have had more than one such choir. For example, on 2 December 1793, the death of one of the church’s greatest early leaders, Bishop August Gottlieb Spangenberg, was announced from the roof of the Single Brethren’s house in Bethlehem by two quartets of trombones.^{xii} In 1919, the trombone choir appeared to be able to call on sixteen players.^{xiii} There is also evidence that players from more than one community sometimes combined for special festivals. It stands to reason that the practice of using trombones owes much to the tradition established at Herrnhut, and it has been argued that this in turn might derive from the German *Stadtpeifer* tradition, but it is equally possible that the credibility of trombones in religious worship is aided by references to *Posaunen* in the Lutheran Bible.^{xiv} By the end of the eighteenth century, the sonic quality of the *Posaunenchor*, together with its versatility – particularly the fact that it could play anywhere, indoors and out – had given the trombone group a wider utility than other instruments and combinations of instruments used by the Moravians.

The *Posaunenchor* had four principal formal functions: it played ‘in lieu of passing of bell’, in that it played from the church tower or wherever a service of worship was to take place, to summon the congregation; it played to announce the death of a church member; it played at gravesides to ‘heighten the solemnities of burial services’; and finally it was used to ‘impart the majesty of sound on high feasts and holy days, to the paraphernalia of the liturgy’.^{xv} In this latter role the *Posaunenchor* had a specific part to play in festivals such as Christmas, the New Year’s Watchnight and Easter Sunrise

services, and the musical services known as ‘Lovefeasts’.^{xvi} It also played for the announcement of Holy Communion.

The repertoire for the trombone choir was mainly made up of chorales from the Moravian version of the Lutheran hymn book. Particular chorales performed by the *Posaunenchor* alone were endowed with special meaning. Some were seasonal or reserved for particular festivals, but others were used effectively as signals to communicate messages to the community at large. Prominent in this regard was the designation of specific chorales as announcements of the death of church members. Additionally, particular hymns were played at designated points in funeral rites, and even as early as 1731, funeral singing in Herrnhut was ‘all with the accompaniment of trombones’.^{xvii}

The practice of signalling a death by sounding a chorale designated for a specific ‘choir’ probably originated in Europe. In April 1751 in Ebersdorf in Thuringia, ‘The “going home” [death] of a Single Sister was announced to the congregation through the sound of horns and trumpets’,^{xviii} and the *Bethlehemische Diarium (Conferenz des Jünger Collegi)* of 4 April 1757 refers specifically to ‘a custom already current in the German Moravian churches’.^{xix} By this time the custom was evidently well-established in the American Moravian communities also, because in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as early as November 1751, Martin Christensen, a Single Brother, ‘departed to be with the Saviour, and his passing was made known to the congregation...by means of a stanza played by trumpets from the gallery on the Brethrens’ House’.^{xx} By 1757 the practice of death signalling had devolved to the trombone group. When a member of the community died, the trombone choir announced the death by playing an appropriate chorale from the church tower.^{xxi}

It is not entirely clear either why or how particular chorales were ascribed as signifiers for different sectors of the community, or the extent to which local preferences could be applied, but while European tradition was being followed, variants of it were also developing in north America. The Bethlehem chorales were prescribed in an entry in the *Bethlehemische Diarium*: the sounding of the death announcement came in the form of the chorale *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*, which was then followed by another chorale that signified the choir of the deceased person. The *Bethlehemische Diarium* specified six categories of signal, but the chorale for the death of a widower was not entered. :

Married: *O Gott du kausches hämmlein*

Single brethren: *Horst du’s Aeltester*

Single sisters: *Drin singt die selige Assemble*

Widowers: [Blank]

Widows: *Was Macht ein Creuzluftvogellein*

Children: *Ihr Kinder wo send ihr ohnfehlbar gebrogen*^{xxii}

At Winston-Salem, the procedure was somewhat different:

When someone departs this life, the whole community will know at once to which Choir the departed soul belonged. If the familiar Choir tune is played after the tune *Nun wieder eins erblasset*, etc., as is customary in Europe, and then the first tune is repeated, we will have in mind the words, *Wenn mein Mund*.^{xxiii}

The *Posaunenchor* death proclamation had three components: the trombone choir played the announcement of death, followed by the announcement of the choir of the departed soul and then a further chorale which ‘reminds the hearer that the Death Angel will some day come to him’.^{xxiv} The schedule of tunes may have been made by Christian Gregor (1723-1801), a hymn writer and organist who became a bishop in the church. (Gregor was a truly prolific composer and it is estimated that more than eleven hundred of his works are in American collections. He appears to have visited Pennsylvania and North Carolina only once, in 1770-2.) It seems certain that the practice was well established by the second half of the eighteenth century, and the coding of chorales was in place – probably incorporating at least some local elements – by the nineteenth century. In 1905, Adelaide Fries of Winston-Salem identified separate designations for married brethren, married sisters, widowers, widows, single brethren, single sisters, older boys, older girls, little boys and little girls.^{xxv}

We can only assume that the trombones used in the first American communities were brought with the settlers, but by the end of the eighteenth century new instruments were being imported from Germany. In 1762, Bethlehem players obtained new instruments and soon after that the *Posaunenchor* of Bethlehem was frequently despatched to other churches to enhance their worship. Instruments were passed from one community to another as new ones were acquired or ensembles became defunct. The instruments formerly used by the trombone choir at Hope, New Jersey eventually found their way to Bethlehem. Bethlehem may have been a supply centre, for it also seems to have been responsible for supplying the community in Gnaddenhutten, Ohio in 1818, and the instruments provided for the Martinez Indian Mission in 1911 were supplied by ‘friends in Bethlehem’.^{xxvi}

The supply of new trombones initially came from Europe, and particularly from the workshops of the Schmied family of Pfaffendorf, Germany. The earliest of these instruments to survive was used in the Gnaddenhutten community, and is dated 1789. Stewart Carter has assembled an inventory of surviving instruments in Moravian communities, and has also looked at patterns of acquisition of instruments used by Moravians.^{xxvii} It is clear that instruments were circulated on a purely expedient basis, but up to the second half of the nineteenth century, new instruments were imported directly from Europe. From the mid-nineteenth century the source of supply switched to the United States, primarily through New York dealers such as Zoebisch & Sons and Carl Fischer, though the Bethlehem players still imported some instruments from Europe. Carter has also made the point that the instruments bought by the Moravians were consistently well made and serviceable, but appropriate for the needs of amateurs rather than professionals.

If surviving instruments are anything to go by, it is evident that other lip-vibrated instruments were also used. Indeed, in the large collection of extant instruments there are valve instruments, cornetti and keyed brass. These instruments testify to the importance of music making generally in Moravian communities, but they are also indicative of an evolving palette of sound that was being used by Moravian musicians. In some places the traditional role of the trombone ensemble remained undisturbed to modern times. The *Posaunenchor* was invariably close to the church hierarchy; indeed, in 1839, the senior class of theological students at Bethlehem appears to have formed a quartet of trombones as part of their training for ministry.^{xxviii}

Individual trombone groups seem to have enjoyed remarkable continuity. It is easy to cite instances where players held their positions from the time they joined until they were very old men. One quartet at Bethlehem entered the service of the church on Easter morning 1818 and remained together for almost half a century.^{xxix} The four players were Charles Frederick Beckel, Jedidiah and Timothy Weiss and Jacob Till. Jedidiah Weiss was born in 1796 and was a watch and clock maker. Timothy Weiss was probably his brother and practised the same trade. Their grandparents had been among the first settlers in the Nazareth community in 1743. Beckel was born in Bethlehem in 1801, and was apprenticed to the elder Weiss on the death of another watch maker to whom he was indentured. Jacob Till, the remaining member of the group, was born in New Jersey in 1799, and moved to Bethlehem as a child. He was apprenticed to his father, a piano maker, and it seems that at some time in his life he made a living as a musician in Pennsylvania.^{xxx} Illustration 1, which dates from 1867, shows (from the left) the three surviving members of the quartet, Charles Frederick Beckel, Jedidiah Weiss and Jacob Till; the trombone on the empty chair is in homage to their deceased colleague, Timothy Weiss. (The photograph is reproduced by permission of the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA.)

The Moravians justifiably claim that their church is the longest established musical institution operating in the USA. The richness of its musical culture and the expertise of its musicians was unmatched in the eighteenth century and for much of the nineteenth century. Consequently its archives hold collections that are a particularly rich source for music historians. Moravian musicians have also performed in broader cultural domains and participated in some of the earliest American performances of large-scale works by canonical European composers. Naturally there was a propensity to be involved in works that had a religious theme, but the idea that all music was a device for devotion also allowed involvement in other repertoire – especially for instruments. A copy of Haydn's *Creation* was obtained in 1810, and performance copies were made by John Frederick Peter for what appears to have been a partial performance of the work in 1811. The Moravians also performed the same composer's *The Seasons*. Both these performances preceded others of these works in the USA. The demanding bass trombone part in the 1811 performance of the *Creation* was played by Jedidiah Weiss.

The burden of duty for Moravian trombone players has often been demanding. In 1919 the trombone choir at Bethlehem was required to play at each of the Sunday services and at 79 festivals and other occasions. Additionally there were 37 death announcements and 35 funerals.^{xxxii} The Bethlehem trombone choir remains an integral part of the community and continues to acquit traditional religious functions, and they still use soprano trombone on the top line. However, the group also has a brief to represent Moravian musical traditions in the wider community. There are also groups in California, Alberta, North Carolina and Ohio.^{xxxiii} One of the reasons for the endurance of the tradition through the nineteenth century was that musicians were seen as key participants in Moravian ritual practices.

ⁱ B. van den Bosch, *The Origin and Development of the Trombone-Work of the Moravian Churches in Germany and All the World* (Winston-Salem, NC: Moravian Music Foundation, 1990), pp. 4-5.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 6.
- ^{iv} Ibid., p. 8.
- ^v Ibid., p. 24.
- ^{vi} Parliament of Great Britain, 29 November 1747, 'An Act for encouraging the People known by the Name of *Unitas Fratrum* or *United Brethren*, to settle in His Majesty's Colonie in *America*'.
- ^{vii} For example, by custom and decree the ribbon or bow with which a woman's cap (*Schepelhaube*) was tied under her chin was coloured according to her choir – pink for single, blue for married, white for widows. C. E. Beckel, 'Early marriage customs of the Moravian congregation in Bethlehem, Pa', *The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society*, 3 (1988), 5. See also G. L. Gollin, 'Family Surrogates in Colonial America: the Moravian Experiment', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 31, no. 4 (1969), 650-8.
- ^{viii} There is a suggestion that there was a trombone group in Bethlehem somewhat earlier than 1754. A note in a single Brothers' Diary for 12 July 1747 mentions '*Wald Hörner u. Posaunen*' being played by a group of single brothers at Gnadenthal near Nazareth. I am grateful to Stewart Carter for sight of his unpublished paper 'From trombone choir to church band: brass instruments in communities of the Moravian Brethren in America', in which he refers to this diary entry.
- ^{ix} Anon., 'Did the trombones play at Christmas?' *The Moravian*, 106, no. 12 (December 1961), 6.
- ^x Ibid., 7.
- ^{xi} See also A. Franks, 'Unity Archives Friends' Day Address, March 13, 1999', unpublished typescript. Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA. I am grateful for having had sight of this source.
- ^{xii} Rev. W. C. Reichel, *Something About Trombones and the Old Mill at Bethlehem* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1884), p. 6.
- ^{xiii} 178th Annual Report of the Board of Elders of the Moravian Church of Bethlehem, PA (1919), p. 17. Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA.
- ^{xiv} *New Grove* 2, s.v. 'Moravian music'.
- ^{xv} Reichel, *Something About Trombones*, p. 5.
- ^{xvi} Lovefeasts appear to have their origins in the meetings in which simple sustenance was taken following the celebration of the Last Supper, but evolved into services that are almost entirely musical. See J. T. Hamilton and K. G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church: The Renewed Unitas Fratrum 1722-1957*, 1967, 2nd edn (Bethlehem, PA.; Winston-Salem, N.C.: Interprovincial Board of Christian Education, Moravian Church of America, 1983), p. 655, n. 12.
- ^{xvii} van den Bosch, *Origin and Development*, p. 5.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- ^{xix} Quoted in K. G. Hamilton, *Church Street in Old Bethlehem* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Congregation, 1942), p. 20.
- ^{xx} Ibid., p. 19.
- ^{xxi} Ibid., p. 20.
- ^{xxii} Ibid., p. 19.
- ^{xxiii} Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 20.
- ^{xxiv} Fries, A., *Funeral Chorals of the Unitas fratrum of Moravian Church* (n.p., 1905), p. 4.
- ^{xxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxvi} Hamilton and Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, p. 515.

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- ^{xxvii} Carter, 'From trombone choir to church band', (unpublished).
- ^{xxviii} Reichel, *Something About Trombones*, p. 6.
- ^{xxix} R. A. Grinder, *Music in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, from 1741-1871* (Bethlehem, PA.: J. Hill Martin, 1873), p. 20.
- ^{xxx} Reichel, *Something About Trombones*, p. 9.
- ^{xxxi} 178th Annual Report of the Board of Elders, p. 17.
- ^{xxxii} I am grateful to Don Kemmerer, Musical Director of the present *Posaunenchor* in Bethlehem, PA, for providing this information.