

Lowell Mason

Lowell Mason (1792 –1872) was a leading figure in American church music, the composer of over 1600 hymn tunes, including 9 in the Christian Science Hymnal that he composed or arranged. Here's one of his most famous arrangements.

Hymn 417

During the first part of his adulthood, Mason lived in Savannah, Georgia, where he spent 14 years working in a bank. Having been an organist and musician from his teen years, Mason became the choir director in 1815 of the Independent Presbyterian Church and five years later its organist. Establishing himself as a leader in his community, Mason was Sunday School Superintendent at his church from 1815 to 1827 and, in 1826, opened the first Sunday school for black children in America.

Hymn 128

After studying composing, Mason set about writing his own collection of hymns. Rejected by publishers in Philadelphia and Boston, Lowell submitted the collection to the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, which published the collection without Lowell's name as author. (It was his wish to remain anonymous as a musician since his profession at the time was that of banker.)

To Mason's amazement his collection of hymn tunes became an instant hit (eventually encompassing over 20 editions and selling over 50,000 copies, an astonishing feat in those days). With this success Lowell negotiated positions as music director at three churches in Boston and returned there in 1826 (although still keeping his job as teller at the American Bank). Eventually the reputation of Mason's choirs at these churches grew to national proportions.

Hymn 368

In 1833 Mason joined with several others to establish the Boston Academy of Music to promote the art of singing, raise the standards of church music, and promote the introduction of music education into the public schools. The academy was immediately successful and by its second year had enrolled over 3000 students. It offered vocal and instrumental instruction, developed both choral and instrumental ensembles, and gave public concerts (among them, the first American performances of Beethoven's symphonies).

Hymn 192

In 1837 (volunteering his services and supplies) Mason was accepted as the first music teacher in a public school in America in a one-year experiment at the Hawes School of South Boston. There were exhibitions from time to time in 1838 at the Hawes School which satisfied the overseeing committee to the extent that in August, 1838 the Boston School Board passed a vote to the effect of establishing that vocal music would be taught in all the public schools of Boston. In its annual report of 1839 the Boston Academy of Music referred to this vote as the "Magna Charta of musical education in this country." In 1838 Mason was appointed music superintendent for the

Boston School System, and today he is considered to be the first important music educator in the United States. Fun fact: It was Mason who set to music the nursery rhyme, "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Hymn 386

In the last part of his career, Mason accomplished another major transformation in American music, this time specifically church music. During a tour of Europe in 1852, he developed a great interest in and enthusiasm for congregational singing. Following his return to New York City the following year, Mason accepted the position of Music Director at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. He immediately disbanded its choir and orchestra, eliminating all professional musicians – save the organist – all to promote congregational singing. During his tenure, which lasted until 1860, he developed congregational singing to the point where Fifth Avenue Presbyterian was known as having the finest congregational singing in the city. So let's close with what is perhaps his most familiar hymn from our own hymnal.

Hymn 2

(Hymns not used: 409, 183 & 404.)

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