

This Month in Moravian History

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Christian Ignatius LaTrobe (1758-1836)

This month marks the 175th anniversary of the death of the Moravian clergyman, musician and composer, Christian Ignatius LaTrobe on May 6, 1836. He served the church in a variety of ways as a talented man from a talented family. His father, Benjamin LaTrobe, was superintendent of the Moravian Church in England. His mother, Anna Margarete Antes, was the sister of John Antes, gifted American composer and instrument maker. His brother, Benjamin Henry LaTrobe, a renowned architect, designed the United States Capitol.



Christian Ignatius LaTrobe was born on February 12, 1758, at the Moravian settlement, Fulneck, in Yorkshire, England, where he attended school before entering the Moravian boys' school in Niesky, Germany, in 1771. After graduating he remained at Niesky as a teacher before returning to England in 1784. Three years later he was appointed secretary to the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, a position he

held for 50 years until his retirement in 1834. His son John remarked, "It is rare to meet with an instance in which a man is so exactly fitted to the position he is appointed to occupy." His father was perfect as secretary since he had an "earnest desire to be an instrument for the advancement of Christ's kingdom, yet with no decided predilection for the Christian ministry." In 1796 LaTrobe was appointed secretary of the Moravian Church in England, and began publishing the missions magazine, *Periodical Accounts*. As missions administrator he translated *History of the Mission of the United Brethren Among the Indians in North America* by Loskiel from German into English in 1794. In 1815 LaTrobe made an official visit to the Moravian missions in South Africa, where he planned the founding of a new mission station named Enon. Besides publishing an account of his trip, he also started writing his posthumously published *Letters to My Children* (1851), a collection of essays on a variety of topics, including the abolition of slavery and his thoughts on church music.

LaTrobe was not only a gifted administrator, but also an accomplished musician and composer. In fact, he was the only Moravian composer to receive wide recognition outside the church in his lifetime. He recalled, "From my earliest infancy, every kind of musical sound immediately attracted my attention." He thanked God for his "genius for music," as he played the violin, viola, violoncello, oboe, French horn, trumpet, trombone, bassoon, clarinet and double bass, besides the organ and pianoforte.

During his school days LaTrobe described his musical taste as "bad ... the noble simplicity of our church music and hymn tunes

was lost in flourishes and ill-placed decorations, and deformed by long straggling interludes." Through the intervention of Bishop Spangenberg LaTrobe switched to a simpler musical style where he strove "not to disturb, but to further the devotion of the congregation." In a collection of Moravian hymn tunes compiled for English audiences, LaTrobe stressed simplicity as the "grand source of beauty in church music" which enables one to "feel His divine presence with us." He lamented the "prevalence of depravity" (i.e. loud and showy instrumentation) which disturbed the connection to Christ.

LaTrobe was a close friend of Franz Joseph Haydn, whom he visited often when the latter visited England. LaTrobe dedicated three piano sonatas to Haydn, in addition to composing clarinet concertos, duets and arias, and more than a hundred vocal pieces.



The first measures of a tune, composed by LaTrobe, as printed in the tune book he edited (1791).

Sources

Periodical Accounts; Dienerblätter; *Letters to My Children* by C.I. LaTrobe, (London, 1851); *Music of the Moravian Church in America*, ed. Nola Reed Knouse, 2008; *Hymn-Tunes sung in the Church of the United Brethren, collected by Christian Ignatius LaTrobe, [1790?]*.