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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MORAVIANS:
THEIR ORIGINS, BELIEFS, AND MUSICAL TRADITIONS

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by

LAUREL KING BRUNKEN

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The American Colonies witnessed and endured the blending and merging of many cultures and religious sects, making the country a "melting pot" of sorts. One group that tended not to "melt" into the cultural, religious, or musical mainstream was the Unitas Fratrum, which established permanent settlements at Bethlehem, Nazareth, Lititz, and Lancaster in Pennsylvania and at Salem, Bethabara, Bethania, Friedland, Friedberg, and Hope in North Carolina. Other names by which the sect has been known at various times include "Moravians," "Moravian Brethren," "Unity of Brethren," "Moravian Church," "Herrnhutters," "United Brethren," "Bohemian Brethren," and "Bruder-Unitat."

The Moravians were the first church to break entirely away from the Papacy. Dating from 1467, they were already firmly established as a separate church by the time Martin Luther tacked his Ninety-five Theses on the Wittenberg door. By the time of the Lutheran Reformation in 1517, the Moravians were maintaining around four hundred parishes with a membership numbering two hundred thousand. They also had by Luther's time two printing houses to publish their church literature and their own hymnal, which was first published in 1501, making it the earliest Protestant hymnal.¹

One of the most important characteristics of the Moravians was the unique place of music and religion in all facets of their day-to-day lives. Religion and music permeated all their activities, both in Europe and in the New World. They quietly influenced both Martin Luther, who included several Moravian hymns in his first book of chorales, and John Wesley, who was impressed by their religious and musical enthusiasm and felt compelled to

¹Donald M. McCorkle, "Moravian Music in Salem: A German-American Heritage" (Ph. D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1958), p. 17.

translate a number of Moravian hymns for his Collection of Psalms and Hymns, published in 1737.²

The history of the Moravian Church generally begins with John Hus (1369-1415), a Bohemian religious reformer who was strongly influenced by the writings of John Wycliffe.³ Its history rightfully begins much earlier with the introduction of Christianity into Moravia.

In 863, Duke Rastislaw requested that Christian missionaries from Rome be sent to his homeland. Thomas Anderson claims in his dissertation that the Duke made this request more from an obsession to repel Germanic influence than from any " . . . personal sense of evangelism." Whatever the reasons, Christianity spread rapidly through Duke Rastislaw's Moravia and its neighbor Bohemia. The heathen priests and soothsayers were nearly banished by the end of the eleventh century.⁴

From this beginning, Rome steadily gained influence and authority in Bohemia and Moravia. In 1079, Pope Gregory VII banned the use of the Slavonic language in worship. Local leaders were often displaced by Roman loyalists. As well as being the Christian leader and authority of the Western world, the Church was also politically and economically strong. The people of Moravia and Bohemia endured the oppressiveness of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries.

Although it was not a time when attempts at reform were met with widespread approval, several Moravian-Bohemian churchmen, notably Conrad of Waldhausen, Milic of Kremsier, and Matthias von Janow, were quite bold in

²See Charles Truman Lawson, "Musical Life in the Unitas Fratrum Mission at Springplace, Georgia, 1800-1936" (Ph. D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1970) pp. 13-18 for a discussion of the influence of the Moravians on Lutheranism and Methodism.

³John Wycliffe (1320-1384) was an Englishman who vigorously opposed the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. Many of his ardent disciples, including Bohemian students at Oxford, spread his teachings throughout central Europe.

⁴Thomas Jerome Anderson, "The Collegium Musicum Salem, 1780-1790: Origins and Repertoire" (Ph. D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1976), p. 9.