



BOOKS AT BROWN

VOL. VIII, NO. 4

1945-1946

FRIENDS of the LIBRARY OF BROWN UNIVERSITY: PROVIDENCE, R. I.

OLIVER SHAW*

JOHN TASKER HOWARD, well known authority on American Music says, that Oliver Shaw was "a musician whose importance has sometimes been overlooked. He is significant because he was prominent at a time when this country was commencing to reassert itself in music . . . He was one of those who paved the road for Lowell Mason."

Oliver Shaw was born March 13, 1779, in Middleboro, Massachusetts, the son of John and Hannah (Heath) Shaw. Before Oliver was seventeen the Shaws, who had eight children, were living in Taunton, Oliver was one of the first students to enter Bristol Academy which was opened there in July, 1796. In early childhood he had lost the sight of his right eye which had been wounded with a pen knife, then at the age of twenty-one while on a voyage to the West Indies with his father who was a sea captain, his left eye was so seriously injured that he was made sightless and unfitted for business.

Finally a musical career was decided upon, so his father took him to Newport, then called the "Queen City of New England," where he was placed under the guidance of the blind organist, Dr. Berkenhead. It is said that for two years Oliver "studied the science of music on the piano and organ . . . allowing himself no rest by day or by night." He further pursued his studies for another two years, this time in Boston with Gottlieve Graupner and Thomas Grainger. After this training he was considered thoroughly equipped for his profession, for awhile he located in Dedham, Massachusetts.

On the front page of the *Columbian Phenix* for Saturday morning July 4, 1807 was the following announcement:

"O. Shaw, respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Providence, that he has taken lodgings at Mrs. Welch's Boarding House in Westminster St., for the purpose of teaching music. Those who wish to receive instruction will please to apply at the above place. He tunes Pianofortes etc., and keeps for the accommodation of his scholars, Music Books, Music Paper, Violin strings, Clarinet reeds, Pianoforte wire, etc., etc."

This marked the arrival of Oliver Shaw in Providence. He had been urged to come here by a Miss Sarah Welch who often visited the Shaws in Taunton. (She was probably the daughter of his boarding mistress.) Her advice proved wise, because some seven months later he deemed it necessary to publish *this* notice.

"O. Shaw, respectfully informs his friends and the Publick that he continues to give lessons in Musick and from the Encouragement already received is induced to confine himself more particularly to this metropolis and informs the Ladies that he instructs the Pianoforte at Mrs. Remington's Academy and will be happy to attend a few Ladies at their own homes if more convenient."

(The "metropolis" referred to, had a population of about 10,000.)

Oliver Shaw was destined to shape the musical life of the community for the next forty years and to become a familiar and highly esteemed personality as he was led to the homes of his pupils by a boy.

During his second season here he formed a singing club which had for its objective, to "elevate the performance of Psalmody in the public worship of God on the Sabbath." And it succeeded quite successfully. By 1815 this club had developed into the first choral society in Providence, the Psallonian Society. It was incorporated by an act of Legislature, in October, 1816, "for the purpose of improving themselves in the knowledge and practice of sacred music and inculcating a more correct taste in the choice and performance of it." Oliver Shaw was the only president and music director during the organization's entire existence of sixteen years. It was the only serious musical society in Providence in the early nineteenth century and its influence on church choirs cannot be over-estimated. In its flourishing days, so it is said, it could render any of the famed oratorios better than they had ever been performed in this country. The society gave its opening concert in Aldrich's Hall, Washington Tavern, Wednesday, October 16, 1816. It was an historical event with the first performance of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus in this city. (Shaw was an enthusiastic student of Handel and Mozart, employing much of their music.)

Five years after his arrival in Providence, he married Sarah Jencks whose father was Caleb Jencks, a surveyor "who helped survey the western territories for Geo. Washington." There were two sons and five daughters by this marriage, all of whom were musical, especially Oliver, Jr. It was not many years before the lad was appearing as a pianist in concerts with his father. Later he was established as a music teacher in Utica, New York. He survived his father by only three years. At least two of the daughters, Sarah and Abbie, were singers, for their names frequently appeared in print. Abbie became Mrs. Cole, and after living away from the city, returned during the middle of the century as a vocal

teacher. The Shaws lived in a large house at the corner of Westminster and Eddy Streets. The building was a veritable conservatory of music often housing as many as ten students from neighboring states and towns — even from Boston. Indeed his ability as a teacher was known throughout New England.

Shaw was organist at the First Congregational Unitarian Church for many years, and, nearly all his life, he owned a music store where, to quote the advertisements “elegant Clementi and Chickering Piano-fortes” were sold “and a variety of new music including Grand Sonatas, Overtures, Progressive Sonatinas and fashionable songs.” The papers often mentioned that “Mr. Shaw has kindly consented to preside at the piano,” also that “he has ever been ready to render his services without fee or reward.” The fact is, that he rarely received remuneration for his choral and concert activities, which were legion.

But his activities were not confined wholly to this community. He was a great favorite as a tenor soloist in Boston and he was one of the founders of the Handel and Haydn Society of that city. His songs “There’s Nothing True But Heaven,” and “Mary’s Tears,” which were his two earliest compositions, were performed many times by that society.

By 1818, his fame as a song writer had traveled as far as Pennsylvania, at least, for Stephen Foster’s sister Charlotte entertained her mother’s guests by singing “There’s Nothing True But Heaven.” The royalties on this song totalled fifteen hundred dollars. Shaw was soon the most popular native song writer in this country and some of his works even reached European centers.

But his efforts were not confined entirely to the field of vocal music. It is written, that “he was much engaged in the discipline and tuition of bands of martial music. He selected and employed the musicians who performed the musical services at Brown University Commencements and on other occasions. In such affairs he was distinguished for his punctuality, fidelity, discretion, and success.”

Oliver Shaw wrote many instrumental works. His marches were played by bands, which were springing up everywhere. Providence had one of the finest of them all, The American Brass Band, which later was lead by Wallie Reeves. The titles of Shaw’s pieces are suggestive of the times and the locale. His marches were named after various governors, — Fenner, Sprague, Francis, Arnold, King — in fact none were forgotten. Political organizations and persons received a share of the honor also, in such songs as “The Whigs of Columbia”, “Harry of the West” (dedicated to the Rhode Island Clay Clubs), and “Harrison’s Serenade” (dedicated to the cause of General Harrison). Hymn tunes

and other compositions received titles suggested by the locality — Benevolent Street, Meeting Street, Planet Street, Brown University, Westminster Waltz, Bristol March, A Trip to Pawtucket.

His compositions number nearly 100, besides many arrangements. They are written in the simple vocal and instrumental forms, with the range of harmonies rarely embracing more than the tonic, dominant, and subdominant with occasional modulations into the relative minor. His rhythms are never complicated. The lack of a thorough mastery of counterpoint restricted the full development of his ideas.

In the *Providence Journal* of Wednesday morning January 3, 1849, was the following obituary notice:

"In this city on the 31st ult. Prof. Oliver Shaw in the 70th year of his age."

It was rather a brief statement for summing up the career of a man who had played so important a role in the city's life for forty years.

Oliver Shaw died December 31, 1848, at 9 o'clock in the evening, to quote the Reverend Thomas Williams, "the hour at which he commonly closed his labors and studies for each day and prepared himself with prayer, to retire for the few hours which he allowed himself for rest." The funeral which was held January 8, 1849 in the Pine Street Baptist Church was largely attended. During the service, members of the Psallonian Society sang some of his best known selections. His remains were borne to the West Burying Ground (now Hayward Park) followed by a large procession which was led by the American Brass Band playing his compositions. The body has since been removed to the Swan Point Cemetery where a special ceremony of tribute arranged by the American Music Committee of the Rhode Island Federation of Music Clubs under the direction of Mr. David L. Stackhouse, '26, was held on Friday, May 10, 1946 at 10 o'clock.

Dr. Hamilton C. Macdougall said "Shaw is by far the best native composer of his time." Lowell Mason said that he was indebted to Oliver Shaw for his start in music, that he "owed all to him." Through Shaw's influence, Lowell Mason conducted a weekly singing school in this city during the winter of 1835 and '36. These classes were held in the chapel of the Beneficent Congregational Church.

Providence is fortunate to have had a man of Oliver Shaw's character and high standards mold its early musical growth.

— *Herbert C. Thrasher*, ORGANIST
Beneficent Congregational Church
Providence, Rhode Island

*In view of the magnificent collection of Oliver Shaw's music at Brown University, we take pleasure in printing the above speech about this former Musical Director of Brown Commencements, one of whose anthems was entitled "Brown University".

Address mail and make checks payable to

BROWN UNIVERSITY, *Friends of the Library, John Hay Library, Providence, R. I.*