

MUSIC THEORY.aargh©

The Modes

Comparing the Aeolian Mode with the Minor Scale (Session 6)

By Dr. Ona Pinsonneault

Let's consider a composition of William Billings (1746-1800) who is widely regarded as the father of American choral music. A publication called *The New-England Psalm-Singer* from 1770 contains the work titled "When Jesus Wept." The "tonic" of this publication is F#. The scale uses the pitches F#, G#, A, B, C#, D, E, F#. The half steps are between G# and A (2 and 3) and C# and D (5 and 6). This is the mode called Aeolian. The identification of the scale arrangement would be "F# Aeolian." (See Clapper Chatter, August 2011, for more information on the modes.)

Now, you might say that this looks like F# Minor, and you would be right. When a composer intends to use the Minor scale, there are some additional pitches that are included in the scale. These pitches are an alteration of the existing spellings of scale degrees 6 and 7. The scale then contains

two spellings of these pitches; 6, raised 6, 7, and raised 7. (An accidental will be used to raise the pitch, such as a natural, sharp, or double sharp. These pitches are not given in the key signature.) The composer chooses when to use each spelling. Generally in harmony, the raised 7 will be used instead of 7; and when the melody leads from 5, to 6, to 7, to 8, the raised 6 and 7 will be used. In "When Jesus Wept" raised 6 would be D# and raised 7 would be E#. There are no uses of these two pitches so we conclude that Billings intended the composition to sound "modal" rather than "minor."

Until next time,

Dr. P

January 2012

When Jesus Wept

A Canon of 4 in 1

From *The New England Psalm Singer* (1770) William Billings
(1746-1800)

Voice I: When Je - sus wept, the fall - ing tear,

Voice II: In mer - cy flowed be - yond all bound;

Voice III: When Je - sus groan'd a trem - bling fear,

Voice IV: Siez'd all the guil - ty world a - round.