

The Influence of Daniel Brink Towner (1850-1919) on the Development of Southern Baptist Music during the Early to the Middle Twentieth Century

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The turn of the twentieth century swept in with a flourish for Baptists and non-Baptists alike. Even as the Wright Brothers and Henry Ford were changing the face of transportation forever, the Southern Baptist Convention was altering the face of Southern Baptist music by sponsoring evangelistic teams that traveled into the cities and towns of the South. The teams, comprised of evangelistic singers as well as preachers, were modeled after those of Dwight L. Moody in the 1890s.¹ Nearly half of these Baptist evangelistic singers would feel the need to pursue some formal education, something not yet offered by their denomination, at the institute founded by Moody. There they would come under the influence of Daniel Brink Towner, a prolific gospel hymnist, an outstanding music educator, and a world-renowned superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute's Department of Music. Towner would stand at the center of the development of Southern Baptist music education in the early part of the century as he trained these young musicians and later helped establish the music curricula at two Southern Baptist seminaries.

One of gospel hymnody's most outstanding musicians, Daniel Brink Towner was born on March 5, 1850, in North Rome, Pennsylvania. His parents, John and Julia Towner, nurtured him spiritually and musically. His father, whom the younger Towner referred to as the "prince of singers,"² was the first to give him music and voice lessons. Singing schools, musical conventions, musical institutes, and private voice lessons complemented Towner's early parental tutelage. Besides an education in music, Towner also received academic training at the Towner Hill School, the Rome Academy, and the Susquehanna Collegiate Institute.³

In the biographical sketch of Towner contained in *Gospel Song and Hymn Writers*, J. D. Hall states: "From his [Towner's] early youth he had dreams of some day being a composer and began to write songs and anthems even before he had studied harmony. Like many of our modern gospel song writers he began by writing secular songs, some humorous and some sentimental."⁴ Singing, however, was Towner's first musical love.

Known as the "wonderful boy bass,"⁵ Towner started singing around 1866 as a teenage baritone soloist in Pennsylvania, southern New York, and eastern Ohio. Towner's vocal talent as a recitalist and as an oratorio soloist blossomed into a full-time career for him by the time he was in his twenties. His additional positions as a church choir director, a composer, a hymnal editor, and an evangelistic singer supplemented his livelihood for the next fifteen years.

Towner was aiding James McGranahan as an evangelistic singer when he first met Dwight L. Moody.⁶ A prime figure in nineteenth century urban evangelism, Moody was in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1884 to lead a series of revival meetings sponsored by the

Cincinnati Ministers' Alliance.⁷ While these meetings were in progress, McGranahan became too ill to continue his leadership role. Towner then served as the primary musician for the revival services.⁸ Moody was so impressed with the manner in which Towner participated in the services as a singer and choir conductor that he extended him a position as an evangelistic singer for a series of revival services. Following the three-month series of revival services, Moody offered Towner a five-year contract as an evangelistic singer.⁹

At the time of the invitation, Towner enjoyed an established career in Cincinnati as a choir director, oratorio soloist, and musical convention director. When tempted with Moody's offer, Towner expressed ambivalent feelings.¹⁰ Moody told Towner that if he did not want to go for five years, then he should go for life. In accepting Moody's invitation to change careers, Towner stated later in *Songs and Singers*: "So we gave up and embarked with him (Moody); and as far as he was concerned, it was for life; for during all those years I have been at his command and I trust that while I tarry behind him, I shall be connected with his work."¹¹ Towner's association with Moody enterprises would last for thirty-three years. In addition to his position as an evangelistic singer, Towner also served Moody as a church musician, hymnist, hymnal editor, and music educator.

As a hymnist, Towner wrote approximately 1,300 compositions.¹² A majority of these works were gospel hymns used during Moody's domestic and overseas revival tours, at musical conventions and institutes, and later in the music classes at Moody Bible Institute. Most of these compositions are contained in over sixty-five collections Towner edited and compiled, either solely or jointly.¹³

In 1893, Towner was hired as the chorister, or choirmaster, of the Moody Memorial Church.¹⁴ He conducted the Moody Church Choir and supervised the direction of other ensembles. Towner's ministry acted as a model for the music students at Moody Bible Institute, many of whom sang in the church choir. He continued in this position until his resignation in 1915.¹⁵

As important as his accomplishments were in the world of gospel music, Towner's prime significance for Southern Baptists came through his roles as a music educator and administrator.

In December 1893, Towner was hired to replace Hugh Henry McGranahan as the superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute Music Department.¹⁶ The Institute, located in Chicago, Illinois, was the first permanent school of higher learning in the United States to offer curricula especially designed to train pastors, preachers, missionaries, and church musicians. During the early decades of the twentieth century, a number of Southern Baptist musicians took advantage of the education offered by the Institute. For the next twenty-five years, Towner would train students, Baptists and non-Baptists alike, to the best of his considerable ability.

Edmund Simon Lorenz, former college president, composer, and founder of the large and influential Lorenz Publishing Company, notes Towner's achievements as a music educator: "Students taught by Dr. Towner have gone out from this place to the uttermost parts of the earth. The other great singers that stood out in the public eye did not, after all, have as wide a sweep of influence as he did from his position in the Institute's music department."¹⁷

Some of Towner's students would be among the first Southern Baptist musicians to lead urban revival services for the Department of Evangelism of the Home Mission Board.¹⁸

The Southern Baptist Convention, sponsor of the Department of Evangelism, had held mission endeavors close to its heart since its birth in 1845. Evangelists who had served in the Confederate army camps during the Civil War continued their missionary work following the war's end in 1865.¹⁹ The Home Mission Board sponsored this new approach to evangelism by assigning individual evangelists to specific areas of service. The board also employed missionaries to serve in other designated territories. For a number of years, the board combined the two groups into one, calling the participants "missionaries," whose responsibilities merged into evangelistic and pastoral ministries.²⁰

Even though the efforts of these dedicated individuals worked for nearly forty years, an air of change circulated through the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1900s. Since Baptists tend to have differences of opinion on any subject, a committee was created to formulate a plan of organized evangelism. The committee's recommendation was approved at the 1906 annual meeting of the convention following an impassioned speech by B. Harvey Carroll of Texas. Using the New Testament as his source, Carroll argued that the qualifications, functions, and ministries of an evangelist were higher in importance than those of a local pastor.²¹

The convention's vote resulted in the creation of the Department of Evangelism under the supervision of the Home Mission Board.²² City evangelism, the department's first major project, was modeled on Dwight L. Moody's 1893 Chicago World's Fair campaign. Moody's successful campaign had focused on taking the gospel to the streets

of Chicago through preaching, gospel solos, and congregational singing. The evangelism department's format of urban revivalism featured two weeks of simultaneous services conducted by multiple teams. From 1907 to 1910, the revival teams were led by preachers only.²³ But, noting the value of evangelistic singers such as Towner²⁴ and others on Moody's revival teams, the department added musicians in 1910.²⁵

Nineteen of the forty-three musicians who served in this program of evangelism attended the Moody Bible Institute's Music Department.²⁶

The primary goal of the music department was to provide a quality program for training men and women to become music teachers, evangelistic singers, choir leaders, keyboardists, and pastors' assistants.²⁷

The success of the music department rested mainly on the curricula Towner developed, coupled with his teaching philosophies. The music diploma curriculum of the Moody Bible Institute under Towner listed courses in theory, sight singing, notation, composition, conducting, normal classes, applied lessons, and ensembles. With the exception of the normal courses, this group of classes would be familiar to present-day freshman and sophomore music majors. In addition, the Institute required classes in Bible, theology, doctrine, personal evangelism, practical work, and missionary work for graduation from this two-year program of study.²⁸

The Bible-music diploma curriculum duplicated a majority of the first year's music courses, but also gave students pursuing this line of study the opportunity to take applied lessons and second-year courses as electives. Advanced Bible, doctrine, and theology courses rounded out the remainder of the two-year curriculum.²⁹

Because the two music diploma curricula formed the foundation for training evangelistic singers and future music supervisors, it is vital to note the philosophy Towner infused into the music courses, particularly his concepts of artistic gospel singing and effective conducting.

Towner taught a majority of the voice students based on his extensive training and experience as both an oratorio and evangelistic soloist. In an interview given to *The Christian Workers Magazine* in 1912, Towner says: “I am heartily in favor of artistic music in evangelistic work. I want artistic music. It is an art to sing a gospel hymn and sing it well, and if you sing your gospel music artistically you will not have to hide your sheet music.” During that same conversation with the reporter, he emphasized his philosophy of artistic gospel singing by commenting: “I believe that every gospel singer should acquire as much of art as possible, and then use it to the glory of God, rather than the praise of man.”³⁰

Towner thus believed that the Christian musician should develop his or her natural talents to the highest degree possible. He accomplished these objectives through the following five approaches to a complete method of vocal production and interpretation: (1) the proper abdominal and intercostal support of the breath, (2) the correct placement of the voice for an even and desirable tone quality throughout the entire vocal range, (3) the development of both mental and physical control of the voice, (4) an intelligent interpretation of both text and music through good articulation, and (5) the use of the standard vocalises of the day by such writers as Cocone, Lutgen, Marchesei, and Root.³¹

In preparing his students for the world of gospel music, Towner considered an effective conducting method as important to an evangelistic singer as good singing techniques. His “scientific conducting method”³² included the following principles: (1) the use of a baton in both congregational and choir directing, (2) a positive and precise beat pattern, and (3) the back of the hand upward in all standard and regular beat patterns.³³ All conducting students rehearsed the members of the class many times. They received critical, though friendly, comments from fellow students, and keen and constructive criticism from Dr. Towner.³⁴

One of the first Southern Baptist musicians to enroll in a Towner conducting class was I. E. Reynolds. Reynolds first met Towner in 1894 during a revival meeting.³⁵ He enrolled in the Institute in 1907 for 18 months, although he did not receive a diploma. In 1910, the Department of Evangelism elected Reynolds as its first evangelistic singer. Following his five-year tenure with the board, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary employed him in 1915 as chairman of the Department of Gospel Music. This designation was changed under Reynold’s leadership to the School of Sacred Music in 1921. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary became the first institution of its kind to incorporate a series of courses in gospel and church music into its curriculum.³⁶

As progressive as Reynolds was in future curriculum development, his early days at the seminary were quite difficult as he attempted to establish a music curriculum. Realizing that he lacked the necessary administrative background and skills, he returned to Chicago during the 1915 Christmas holidays for a series of conferences with Towner. Towner traveled to Ft. Worth, Texas, in September 1916 for a week to hold conferences with the seminary’s administration, faculty, and students.³⁷ As important as Towner’s

message was to the seminary as a whole, the primary reason for his visit was to aid Reynolds in developing a quality music curriculum for the Department of Gospel Music.

With the exception of the courses in the history of music and in the history of hymns and hymn tunes, the music curriculum developed by Reynolds and Towner was essentially the same as that used by Towner at Moody. The curriculum took two years to complete. In February 1917, Towner returned to the campus to present a series of lectures entitled “Church and Gospel Music.”³⁸ It is noteworthy that the seminary’s president, B. H. Carroll, who had influenced the formation of the Department of Evangelism, cancelled all classes for two days so that students and faculty could attend the lectures.³⁹ Through this lecture series, Towner both advanced the music curriculum and made direct personal contact with many Southern Baptist educators and future church musicians.

The success of the music department at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary prompted the trustee board of the Baptist Bible Institute, (now the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary), at its founding in 1918, to consider creating a music department. In 1919, the Institute established the school’s music department under the direction of Ernest Orlando Sellers.⁴⁰ The creation of the music department gave students in the Southeast an opportunity to enroll in a seminary music program. Sellers, who assisted Towner at the Moody Memorial Church for five years and taught music at Moody Bible Institute for seven years, came to the chairmanship with excellent administrative and musical credentials. He remained as the department’s chairman until 1945.⁴¹

Music courses at Baptist Bible Institute, identical to those at Moody in title and content, made up the two-year course of study in the department's infancy.⁴² Sellers strengthened and improved the curriculum by conferring music degrees, establishing a three-year bachelor of gospel music degree, and improving and adding courses to the program. The current seminary's Division of Church Music Ministries is housed in the Sellers Building, which is named for E. O. Sellers.⁴³

Upon his retirement in 1945, Sellers was succeeded by another Towner student and 1915 Moody graduate, Plunkett Martin. Martin, like Reynolds, served as an evangelistic singer for the Department of Evangelism. He joined the music faculty at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1942, took over the chairmanship in 1945, and remained in that position until 1960. The seminary's Martin Music Library is named for him.

Martin, along with Reynolds and Sellers, instilled into hundreds of Baptist seminarians the philosophy of excellence in gospel music that they themselves had received under D. B. Towner.

Harry Dixon Loes, a former Towner student, Moody faculty member and noted gospel hymn writer, comments in an article in the 1948 September-October edition of the *Gospel Hymn Writers Magazine*: "It is doubtful that any other teacher of sacred music influenced as many lives as did Dr. Towner for God and the good of religious music." He continues his observation of Towner's importance as an educator by stating: "All over the world there have been and still are Christian workers of all kinds who were under his teaching or magnetic spell at the Institute."⁴⁴

Dr. Donald Hustad reflected on Towner's value to his students as a conducting teacher and administrator in a speech at Moody Bible Institute. Hustad, former chairman of the Moody Institute's Music Department and senior professor emeritus at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, attributes some of his earliest music education to Towner. In a message entitled "Moody Bible Institute's Contribution to Hymnody" delivered during the 1968 Founder's Week, he says: "My own first introduction to the wonders of sight-singing and of conducting as a young boy in the 1920s came in Tuesday night classes at a small Bible school, taught by a Moody graduate who used Towner's textbook, *Class and Chorus, Revised*." In that same message, Hustad adds: "He (Towner) set the standard for fifty years of Institute musicians and in those days the (conducting) beat was very precise, the interpretation also, but the choirs and the congregations sang gloriously."⁴⁵

Another intersection between Towner and Southern Baptists took place the year he retired from the Moody Bible Institute. At the time he was negotiating a large hymnal project. Towner relates some of these arrangements with members of the Southern Baptist Convention in a letter dated 1918 to Mrs. George Reynolds, mother of William J. Reynolds. In part of the correspondence to her, Towner says: "I am thinking of editing a large book for the Baptist denomination in the South. I have been approached on the subject and negotiations are being carried on. If I should do that, I shall of course use some of my new materials."⁴⁶ It is unknown if the transactions between Towner and members of the Southern Baptist Convention broke down or if the hymnal project was cut short by his death. Although this "large book" was never completed, the convention's negotiations with Towner attest to his prominence as a composer and an editor-compiler.

Towner continued composing gospel hymns and traveling the country as an evangelistic singer following his retirement from the Institute in December 1918.⁴⁷ Perhaps he planned to include some of these new hymns in the projected Southern Baptist hymnal mentioned in his letter to Mrs. George Reynolds. Unfortunately, he died during an evening revival service in the town of Longwood, Missouri. On October 3, 1919, he fainted after leading the praise service and singing one of his new compositions, "Would You Believe?" Towner was taken to a nearby hotel where he died of acute uremia.⁴⁸ Out of respect for Towner, Longwood's mayor declared a day of mourning the next day. The mayor himself accompanied Towner's body back to Chicago for burial in Rosehill Cemetery.⁴⁹

Just as the oak trees surrounding Towner's gravesite cast a large shadow on his tombstone, so does Towner's influence stretch across the world of early twentieth century Southern Baptist music. It is revealed in the Baptist revival services led by Moody-trained evangelistic singers. It is heard in the echo of a million Baptist voices which proclaimed the gospel through Towner's hymns and promised to "Trust and Obey" because "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" is found "At Calvary." It is seen in the ministries of church musicians educated at two Baptist seminaries under Towner-trained chairmen. Towner's influence touched the lives of many Southern Baptist musicians during the first half of the twentieth century. That is something to reflect on and to celebrate as the ninetieth anniversary of this outstanding church musician's death approaches on October 3, 2009.

Notes

1. *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, s.v. “Evangelism.”

2. Edward Perry Carroll, “Daniel Brink Towner (1850-1919): Educator, Church Musician, Composer, and Editor-Compiler” (Ed. D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1970), 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

6. *Ibid.*, 33.

7. *Ibid.*, 58.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 59.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 60.

12. Contrary to the 2,000 compositions cited in many current hymnal handbooks and other hymnic sources, Towner wrote approximately 1,300 works. Sixty-four of the over sixty-five collections compiled-edited by Towner, either solely or jointly, coupled with thirty-five editions by others containing his works, were examined by this writer. In addition, ninety missing compositions were listed only by titles in copyright catalogues and not examined. Towner’s compositions include: 891 gospel hymns; 20 gospel anthems; 4 gospel choruses; 25 religious ballads; 97 children’s hymns; 12 temperance songs; 62 standard hymns; 6 Anglican chants, sentences, and responses; 221 anthems; 50 secular works; 90 missing compositions; and 5 unpublished manuscripts. This makes a total of 1,283 compositions. Perhaps many of the same Towner compositions were included in several other publications. This way, the same work was counted more than once. *Ibid.*, 245-335.

13. Towner produced over sixty-five collections, either solely or jointly. This number of publications includes the initial editions and their variations, both examined and not examined by this writer. Towner’s compilations are divided into the following categories: multi-purpose hymnbooks; gospel songbooks; translations; advanced pages, popular selections, gospel song sheets, and pamphlets; temperance songbook; Sunday

school hymnbooks; official institute hymnals; choir book collections; musical institute tunebooks; choir development books; and music theory textbooks. Ibid., 343-49.

14. Ibid., 85.

15. Ibid., 98.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 223.

18. *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, s.v. "Evangelism, Home Mission Board Program of."

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. The general responsibilities of an evangelistic singer included leading the congregational singing, singing solos, and conducting the choir. In addition to these duties, the music evangelist took part in the inquiry room, counseled in young converts' meetings, and composed hymns for congregational singing and choir anthems during the services.

25. Carroll, Ibid, 228.

26. Ibid., 229.

27. Ibid., 100.

28. Ibid., 107-8.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 110.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. The American Temperance University conferred on D. B. Towner the honorary degree of Doctor of Music in 1901. The institution, located in Harriman, Tennessee, is also known as Harriman University. Ibid., 35-6.

35. Ibid., 230.

36. Ibid., 231.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 232.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 233.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 223.

45. Ibid., 111, 234.

46. Ibid., 227.

47. Ibid., 57-8.

48. Ibid., 48-9.

49. Ibid.

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