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Johann Christoph Müller: Harmonist Pioneer, Composer, and Apostate

By Emily Lapisardi

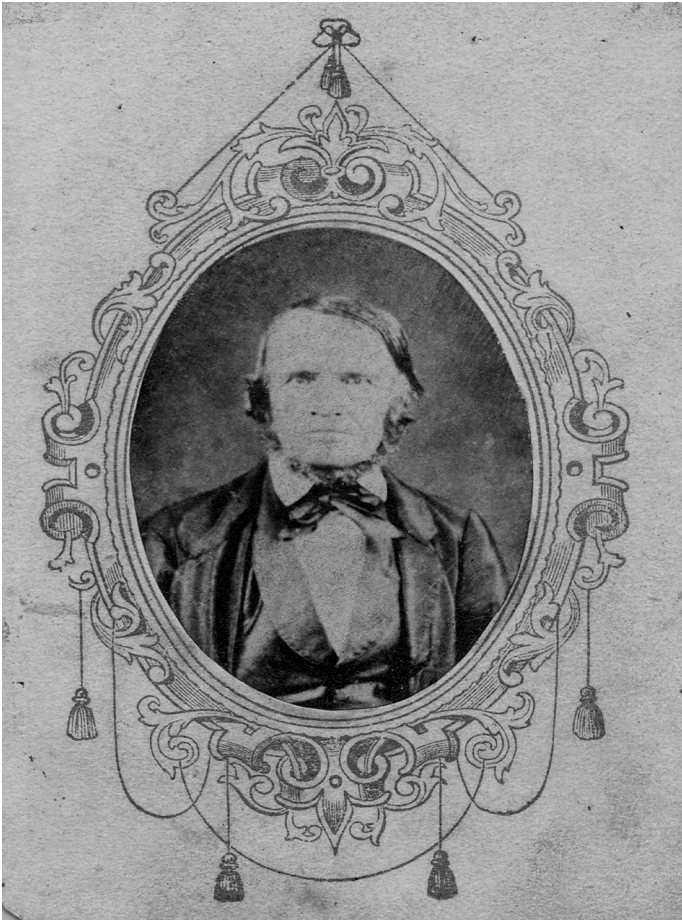
Johann Christoph Müller, a physician who served George Rapp's Harmony Society as "doctor, music director, schoolteacher, printer, archivist, [and] museum curator,"¹ was both a member of Rapp's elite inner circle and a dissenting voice within the Society. Documentary evidence reveals flares of conflict between Müller and Rapp predating their immigration and culminating in Müller's departure in the Schism of 1832, yet Müller was also a trusted Harmonist leader and one of an advance party of five men who came to the United States to prepare the way for the mass immigration of Rapp's Separatists.² Although some scholars have defined Müller as a man of science whose rationalism was at odds with Rapp's mysticism, investigation of Müller's hymn texts—and his involvement with the Society's mystic-scientific alchemical experiments—paint a more complex portrait.

Johann Christoph Müller was born in Unterweissach, Germany, on May 15, 1778, the eldest son of a butcher and a schoolmaster's daughter. Little is known of his early years prior to his association with Rapp's Separatists. He must have received some training in medicine, likely through apprenticeship; archive director and Harmonist scholar Hermann Ehmer has noted that the young Müller referred to himself as "chirurgiae studiosus," indicating that he was a surgeon's apprentice.³ Müller's musical manuscripts and compositional style also indicate that he probably received little formal instruction in music theory; he habitually drew stems on the wrong sides of notes and relied upon a simple harmonic language in his compositions. Additionally, he did not employ the standard Germanic chorale form in his hymns, which are more reminiscent of folk melodies both in texture and form. Müller played the piano, violin, and flute, but does not seem to have achieved virtuosic proficiency on any instrument. Rather, his musical endeavors mark him as a passionate and gifted amateur.

Müller was evidently drawn to the charismatic preaching of George Rapp as a young man, yet remained an uncertain convert as late as 1801. In that year, Rapp wrote a rebuking letter to Müller, who was physically—and possibly spiritually-- distant from the rest of the Separatists. The straying member was assured, “We love you even though you are leaving because we know truth (now hidden) has been revealed to you. Go far and amuse yourself on the broad forest path; don’t miss the mayflowers.” Reminding Müller that he is part of an elect band of Christians, Rapp assured him that, although he was wandering away from his brethren, “none of this shall keep you from our friendship.” Rapp simultaneously gave Müller the freedom to depart while reminding him of his place within the group through familial language and shared truth. “Nor should brothers be separated for too long a time.” Rapp wrote, “Implore God that it won’t happen.” Rapp states that he has been ill, even near death, and had hoped that Müller would come to him. He closes with an invitation for Müller to visit soon so that Rapp might show him “ways of the spirit.”⁴

This letter establishes the relationship between the two men while foreshadowing some of the conflicts which would plague their association for over thirty years. Rapp recognizes Müller as one of an initiated band of converts, but cautions that his “soul has a long way to go.” The tone wavers between paternalistic and brotherly. Müller’s physical distance and lack of visits are interpreted as a personal rejection of Rapp.

By 1803, Müller had returned not only to the fold, but also to its innermost circles. On October 7, he, George and Johannes Rapp (George’s only natural son), Wilhelm Schmidt, and Dr. P. F. C. Haller arrived together in Philadelphia to prepare for the mass immigration of Rapp’s Separatists.⁵ Musicologist Richard Wetzel has suggested that Müller was included in this party because “he was one of the few Harmonists who spoke English.”⁶ While Müller certainly acquired good facility in English, along with many other members of the Harmonist upper echelon, it seems unlikely that he spoke the language upon arriving in 1803. Like many musicians, he probably had a quick ear and a facility for linguistic study; within a few years, he was one of a select group of Harmonists who served as a translator for Rapp, whose English always remained limited. Rapp’s correspondence from this period indicates that Müller and Schmidt remained in Philadelphia while Rapp searched for suitable land. He encouraged them to learn as much English as possible, noting, “I cannot learn any anymore, but it is necessary.”⁷



Johann Christoph Müller
(Old Economy Village #617)

In late 1804, a tract of land was purchased along the Connoquenessing Creek in Pennsylvania, and on February 15, 1805, Rapp's followers signed the Articles of Agreement which bound them together in communal life. Among the immigrants who had joined Rapp in America were three of Johann Christoph Müller's brothers, one sister, and the woman he would marry in May of 1805, Johanna Kuom. The couple had two children, Heinrich (born in 1806) and Augustina (born in 1808), neither of whom lived more than a few months.

Less than a month after Müller's infant daughter died, another baby girl was born into the Society—George Rapp's only grandchild, Gertrude. An especially close relationship developed between Gertrude and Müller. Gertrude's father died shortly before her fourth birthday, and Müller appears to have become something of a father figure, and certainly a mentor, for the young girl. Gertrude Rapp was the only Harmonist woman who received formalized instrumental training; Müller provided her with piano lessons from an early age and the two performed together frequently. Additionally, the first secular art songs in the Harmonist repertoire were given by Müller to Gertrude as a birthday gift when she was in her early teens.

John Melish's travel account of 1811 reveals that music making under Müller's leadership was already an important part of Harmonist life. Visitors were serenaded by a chamber orchestra and choir; however, musical life within the Society did not truly begin to flourish until after the relocation to western Indiana in 1814.

Despite the rampant illness plaguing the Harmonists as they settled in Indiana, Dr. Müller was among the last members to leave Pennsylvania. George Rapp's letters to his adopted son Frederick included increasingly desperate pleas: "If Christoph does not come, the people will die through the winter," he wrote on November 8, 1814,⁸ and in early December, "Christoph writes and always speaks of peace, there is no danger, and meanwhile the people die away. If he had immediately mounted a horse and been here in 14 days all would have been well and he would again be back with you by Christmas, but now it is scarcely worth it for those who are dangerously ill will die before someone would come."⁹ Again, Müller's physical distance from Rapp had become a point of contention.

However, Müller's end of the correspondence reveals that he was functioning both as a physician and a spiritual leader in Pennsylvania and did not feel he could abandon the people who remained there. He stated in a long letter to George Rapp on December 17, 1814, that he had recommended a treatment for the fever to the Society's other doctor, Wilhelm Schmidt, in Indiana, and wryly asserted, "On Christmas, I am resolved to speak on the salvation of sinners, a subject on which I possess a great deal of material." He assures Rapp, "Father, I am walking in the light and I shall still become satisfactory to the Lord Jesus, to you, and the community."¹⁰ As in Germany, Müller simultaneously occupied the roles of errant brother and member of Rapp's innermost circle.

Beginning in the summer of 1816, Müller began to compose the first distinctly Harmonist hymns in both text and tune, likely through the influence of interaction with the Shakers. In the Indiana wilderness, cordial relations had sprung up between the Harmonists and the similarly pioneering Shaker settlement of West Union. In a letter to Seth Youngs Wells, Shaker leader and composer Issachar Bates noted that the Harmonists “used no Hymns nor songs but old ones, till they found that we composed our own Hymns and songs—and now they can have new ones too.”¹¹ Prior to this time, Harmonist hymnody had consisted of Lutheran and Pietist tunes, often with new or adapted text by George Rapp. Müller’s first hymn, by contrast, melds a dark and mystical text with a lilting folk-like melody:

**Durch zerfallne Kirchenfenster
(composed July 24, 1816)**

Durch zerfallne Kirchenfenster
Fällt so tief der Mondenschein:
Grausig wandeln die Gespenster
Über moderdem Gebein.
Dumpe Glockentöne schallen,
Von dem hohen Thurm herab;
Und des Strauches Blätter wallen,
Lispelnd auf bemoostes Grab.

Through broken church windows
falls so deeply the moonlight:
Gruesomely promenade the specters
over moldering bones.
Thudding belltones resound
from the high spire;
And the leaves of the shrubs seethe,
whispering over the mossy grave.

In an 1843 copy of this hymn, Müller noted, “This was the first piece which I composed.”¹² This text, with its supernatural imagery and fascination with death and decay, hardly seems like the work of a coolly rational man of science. Although this tune remained among the Society’s

favorites, the original text was never included in their printed hymnals.

A week later, Müller composed both the text and tune for another hymn, “Es blüht ein Blümlein,” which extols the virtue of modesty. Although this text is more conventionally hymn-like, it still contains much more first-person-singular language than most Harmonist hymns. Müller’s music can thus be interpreted as a personal expression of his own beliefs and perspective. Unlike George Rapp in his hymn texts, Müller does not presume to speak for all of the members.

A few weeks later, the Society corresponded with one of its business agents regarding the purchase of a “good piano” and recommended a maker whose work Müller had previously examined.¹³ Whether or not this desire for an instrument was directly linked to Müller’s outpouring of song, the purchase of a new piano further accelerated musical growth within the community.

On February 2, 1817, Müller signed and dated two additional hymns, “Herr, führe mich” and “Die Menschenlieb.” The first describes a “weary pilgrim’s” spiritual journey in language reminiscent of Rapp’s 1801 letter of chastisement to Müller:

1. Herr, führe mich mit Engelstreue,
Durch meiner Jugend bunte Flur,
Ich folge dir mit banger Scheue,
Und seh auf deine Winke nur.
Nun folg’ ich dir durch rauhe Lüfte,
Mit wundem Fuss auf Dornen nach;
Und schlepp’st du mich durch Felsenklüfte,
So sey’s mein Schicksal Tag für Tag.

1. Lord, lead me with faithful angels
Through my youth’s blossoming meadow.
I follow you with anxious shyness
And see only your traces.
I follow you through troubled air,
With wounded feet on the thorny way.
And you carry me through rocky clefts,
So is my fate day after day.

Again, Müller’s narrator employs first-person language to admit that his spiritual journey has been fraught with difficulties and darkness. In

subsequent verses, he looks toward his eternal reward from the perspective of his “valley of tears.” In the final stanza, he states, “I will consecrate myself to virtue. Then lead me to thy counsel, and let me finally thrive from the seeds of the weary pilgrim’s tears.” As in “Durch zerfallne Kirchenfenster,” Müller’s gentle, charming melody does not reflect the often-melancholy text.

The final signed and dated hymn Müller completed during this period is an ode to charity, “Die Menschenlieb.” This text is more conventionally Harmonist; only the final stanza employs first-person language, while the others describe the rewards of charity in third-person. Significantly, the switch in perspective in the final stanza occurs when the narrator asserts, “I dedicate now my life to wisdom’s venture,” a statement which seems very much in keeping with Müller’s scientific, musical, and spiritual pursuits. In September 1817, Issachar Bates recorded that, in conversation with Müller, he had learned that the Harmonists had composed “upwards of a hundred” hymns that year.¹⁴

By December 1817, Harmonist music-making had expanded to the point that a multi-movement cantata composed by Müller, the innkeeper Friedrich Eckensperger, and possibly also Frederick Rapp was performed for Christmas. It combined newly composed music for chamber orchestra, piano, choir, and vocal soloists with adapted texts by German poets and one anonymous text, likely by Müller.

Between 1819 and 1820, Müller prepared the Society’s first printed hymnal, which contained lyrics for 254 hymns; among them were several of Müller’s own compositions. Four years later, the Society acquired its own printing press, and Müller supervised its use. Among the works he printed were two small volumes of Harmonist hymn texts and George Rapp’s philosophical treatise, *Thoughts on the Destiny of Man*. A second Harmonist hymnal was printed in 1827, containing additional new hymns and increasingly intricate festival odes.

Music making continued to evolve in complexity and scale as the younger generation of Harmonist musicians, who had been trained by Müller, matured. By the time of the Society’s settlement of Economy, Pennsylvania, in the 1820s, Müller had become the music director of an orchestra consisting of violins, violas, horns, cellos, double basses, flutes, bugles, clarinets, and trumpets which performed both Harmonist works and music from the outside world. A select four-part choir of men and women also performed oratorios and fest odes under his leadership.

Among the young Harmonist musicians in these ensembles were future trustees Jonathan Lenz and Jacob Henrici, Gertrude Rapp, and Harmonist “bad girl” Hildegard Mutschler and her future husband Conrad Feucht. Strikingly, the members of Müller’s ensembles were almost exclusively part of the Harmonist upper echelon—George Rapp’s inner circle and their families.

During this time, George Rapp, taking Jacob Boehme’s Christian alchemical allegory literally, was engaged in alchemical experiments assisted by his *soror mystica*, the attractive young Hildegard Mutschler. Correspondence regarding Harmonist alchemy reveals that several other Society members, including Frederick Rapp, Eusebius Böhm, Wilhelm Schmidt, and Johann Christoph Müller were also involved in the work. Hildegard’s elopement with businessman Conrad Feucht, and George Rapp’s subsequent insistence on their return (contrary to his own teachings and practice), inaugurated a period of crisis within the Society. Müller’s involvement with the elite Harmonists’ alchemical work, which melded mystical theology with chemistry, serves as further evidence that he cannot be viewed as a strict rationalist; his scientific pursuits were in service to the Society’s religious goals.

In 1828, Müller began keeping a critical record of the concerts at Economy which includes the pieces performed, his evaluations of their performance, and any important guests who attended the performance. He frequently notes the presence of William Cummings Peters, a music publisher and teacher then living in Pittsburgh. Peters had been hired to compose and arrange works for the orchestra and to teach piano lessons to Gertrude Rapp, who had surpassed Müller’s abilities and was rapidly becoming something of a teenaged virtuoso. Among the works mentioned in the concert log are compositions by Haydn, Mozart, Rossini, Peters, and Müller.

Between 1829 and 1830, the log reveals Müller’s increasing frustration with the imperfect performances of the orchestra and his own limitations as a director. His other duties, including serving as physician, printer, and curator of the Society’s new natural history museum, consumed much of his time. By October 1830, Peters instructed Gertrude Rapp to tell Müller that “if he gives up music I shall skin him alive, stuff him, and put him in the Museum.”¹⁵ A note in the concert log for July 1831 reveals another potential source of difficulty—insufficient rehearsal. Müller reported that concerts could not be held because George Rapp had decreed that all

hands were required to “leave their shops to work out in the fields ... not to mention other excuses.”¹⁶ This conflict reached a head in September 1831, when Müller records that “the music room was locked up without my knowledge, and when I made enquiry, I was told that music shall cease entirely for an entire month.”¹⁷

During this period of musical crisis, Count Leon and his followers entered Economy to the accompaniment of the Harmonist brass ensemble playing from the church tower. Müller was evidently impressed by the fine musicians among the Count’s retinue and contrasted their accomplishments with his own, noting that he played a piano solo for them “poorly enough.”¹⁸ Musical performance was again stopped in November 1831; whether this was by Rapp’s order or necessitated by the growing conflict between Count Leon and George Rapp is uncertain.

In addition to claiming to be the Messiah, the Count passed himself off as a successful alchemist who had discovered the secrets which had eluded the Harmonists. Wilhelm Schmidt, Müller’s fellow physician and alchemist, spearheaded an attempted coup by the Count’s Harmonist followers to depose George Rapp. A highly dramatic vote was held, the situation devolved into rioting, and roughly one-third of the Society’s membership departed with the Count. The last person to sign the document of separation was Johann Christoph Müller.

Müller’s apostasy most likely evolved from his long history of personal conflict with and chastisement by George Rapp, and their increasing divergence on the role of music making within the Society. The Count presented himself as both a charismatic spiritual figure and a highly-cultured intellectual, a combination that likely appealed deeply to Müller. Wilhelm Schmidt’s role in the schism may have also had a significant impact on Müller’s decision; the two men had been medical and alchemical colleagues for many years, and had immigrated together in the advance party.

After leaving the Harmony Society, Müller attempted to maintain contact with Gertrude Rapp, writing to her on May 27, 1832, to express his satisfaction with life in the Count’s new society. “I have been happier than I have been in twenty years because a deep peace flows through my heart,” he stated. This letter not only evidences Müller’s sense of fulfillment in his new community, but also expresses his continued bonds of affection for Gertrude.

To Gertrude Rapp, however, Müller had become a “past friend ...

terribly deceived.” In a scathing reply, she asserted her familial loyalty over her friendship with her former mentor. The seceders, she wrote, had been “seduced ... to the most terrible deeds.” Although she believed that Müller had been persuaded to depart “through swindle and deceit,” she warned him that God would not forgive his apostasy. Because Müller and his companions had “left the narrow path” of Harmonist life, Gertrude asserted that they no longer can have any claim to the friendship of those who withstood temptation. The seceders, in rejecting the Harmonist tenet of celibacy, “would not follow [Christ’s] way of self-denial and obedience ... the light and truth you once had turned into self-seeking.” The correspondence was terminated at Gertrude’s request.¹⁹

Müller had not been permitted to take his personal possessions; he wrote to Romelius Baker from Phillipsburg asking, “Have I not with all my services in the musical line and otherwise, earned my violin and my flute which you took from me?”²⁰ The instruments and books, including several Müller had brought with him from Germany, were apparently never sent to him, and Gertrude Rapp refused the gift of a keyboard method book which Müller copied for her in February 1832.

Life with the Count did not remain tranquil for long. By July 1833, Müller accused him of being a charlatan and demanded that he prove his skill as an alchemist; when satisfactory evidence was not forthcoming, Müller threatened him with a lawsuit. The Count fled down the river with his most loyal followers, and the society at Phillipsburg disbanded.

By 1843, Müller was teaching music to the daughter of another Harmonist seceder and bitterly denouncing George Rapp as a despot and monopolist.²¹ He worked as a physician and homeopath in Bridgewater, Pennsylvania, near Economy, until his death in 1845 at the age of sixty-seven.

Müller’s musical legacy remained alive within the Society through his compositions and students, particularly Gertrude Rapp who, with Jacob Henrici (the Society’s most musically educated member), took over leadership of the ensembles after Müller’s departure. A man with a multiplicity of talents, Müller rose to a leadership role in the Harmony Society even as he struggled spiritually, repeatedly entering into conflict with George Rapp. The seeds of years of strife finally bore the fruit of apostasy, which in turn led to further disillusionment and bitterness. These conflicts, and Müller’s hymn texts, reveal him to be a strong and self-assertive personality with a mystical bent who submitted to the yoke

of humility even as his nature repeatedly chafed against it; he served the Society with dedication and zeal for over thirty years, yet repeatedly found himself at odds with George Rapp. Müller's influence on the musical and cultural life of the Harmony Society—as a composer, music director, printer, and museum curator—cannot be overestimated. George Rapp may have been the Harmonists' spiritual father, but Johann Christoph Müller was their musical father.

Notes

1. Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Disciples, Pioneers, and Heirs* (Evansville: University of Southern Indiana Press, 1992), 154.
2. Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1972), 61.
3. Dr. Hermann Ehmer to Mr. Raymond V. Shepherd, January 11, 1999. Given to the author by Dr. Ehmer.
4. Hilda Kring, *The Harmonists: A Folk-Cultural Approach* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973), 2.
5. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 61.
6. Richard D. Wetzel, *Frontier Musicians on the Connoquenessing, Wabash, and Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 20.
7. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 64.
8. Arndt, *A Documentary History of the Indiana Decade of the Harmony Society, Volume I* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1975), 69.
9. *Ibid.*, 78.
10. *Ibid.*, 90.
11. Issachar Bates to Seth Youngs Wells, September 2, 1817: Shaker Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.
12. Thalia Bentel copybook, Old Economy Village.
13. Arndt, *A Documentary History of the Indiana Decade of the Harmony Society, Volume I*, 244.
14. Issachar Bates to Seth Youngs Wells, September 2, 1817: Shaker Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.
15. Wetzel, 84.
16. *Ibid.*, 85.
17. *Ibid.*, 86.
18. Wetzel, 86.
19. Translated from originals in the archives of Old Economy Village by Hilda Kring as part of the site's women's history project.
20. Wetzel, 87.
21. Thalia Bentel copybook.