

Sacred Harp: History & Tradition

by Steven Sabol of the Washington, D.C., area Sacred Harp Singers

Revised February 5, 2005

At Sacred Harp singings and conventions, participants sing the powerful and harmonious American music from *The Sacred Harp*, the most enduring of the shape-note tunebooks popular in 19th-century rural America. This tunebook, in its several editions, has given its name to a tradition of unaccompanied community singing and fellowship surviving to the present day. While “harp” is an old word for a hymnal with music, in a broader sense, the “sacred harp” is the human voice or ensemble of voices.

History of Shape-Note and Sacred Harp Singing

The original core of music in *The Sacred Harp*, first published in 1844, consists of (1) hymn tunes, psalm tunes, anthems, and contrapuntal fusing (or fuguing) tunes by late 18th- and early 19th-century New England composers such as William Billings, Daniel Read, Timothy Swan, and Jeremiah Ingalls, who were influenced by 18th-century English rural church music, and (2) early 19th-century Southern folk hymn tunes and spirituals often derived from secular British or Irish folk melodies and harmonized by tunebook compilers. This 3- or 4-part music did not imitate European musical tastes of the time but instead exhibited a stark, rugged, and often lively style representing a fusion of elements of Anglo-Celtic folk music with those of medieval to baroque European church music. These musical gems were set to powerful Judeo-Christian texts popular at the time, many written by the English clergymen Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and John Newton. A few texts are patriotic rather than religious. The music is characterized by melody lines in the tenor part, strong rhythms, and open harmonies (particularly fifth intervals without the third note). Many songs are in minor or modal scales (e.g., the hymntune *Wondrous Love* sung in the Dorian mode) and gapped scales (e.g., the pentatonic *Amazing Grace*). Each part (treble, alto, tenor or lead, and bass) retains a degree of melodic independence (“dispersed harmony”) which, while creating some dissonance, produces a beautiful perception of multiple simultaneous melodies. Early revisions of *The Sacred Harp* supplemented the original core of music with songs in similar styles written by mid-19th century Southern composers such as the Reese brothers. In the early/mid-20th century, two divergent revisions of *The Sacred Harp* incorporated additional songs, folk hymntunes, and intricate fusing tunes by Southern shape-note composers. The most recent revisions (the *1991 Edition* and the *Cooper Edition* of 1992 and 2000) incorporate several dozen new songs by living composers from various regions of the United States, along with additional old songs.

In contrast to most church hymnals, songs in *The Sacred Harp* and similar tunebooks are titled according to the name of the tune (e.g., *Restoration*) rather than the beginning of the text (e.g., *Come thou fount of every blessing*). This format emphasizes the music over the text (the hymn or psalm) and reflects the origin of these tunebooks in the singing school tradition rather than in church worship. In fact, many texts, particularly those by Isaac Watts, are used for multiple musical settings in these books.

Sacred Harp music is written in “shape notes,” which resemble standard round notes in every respect except that the head of each note has one of four shapes to indicate its interval from the key (tonic) pitch. This system was based on the practice originating in Elizabethan England of singing the seven notes of an octave with four-syllable solmization. The major scale is sung as *fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa*, while the minor scale (3 half-steps down from the major scale) is sung as *la, mi, fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la*. The logic of this system was probably based on the fact that each half-step always leads up to *fa*. The four-shape system (*fa* = triangle, *sol* = oval, *la* = square, and *mi* = diamond) was invented around 1800 in the Northeastern U.S., and it enabled many untrained singers of the day to sight-read music without having to understand key signatures. Shape-note music immediately became popular, and it strongly stimulated the expansion of the singing-school movement, which had arisen in New England around 1720, enabling many Americans to learn to sing written music.

Singing schools and shape-note singing flourished in the early 19th century as a popular form of recreation in the Southern and Western frontiers and led to the publication of numerous oblong tunebooks including *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), *Missouri Harmony* (1820, used by Abraham Lincoln), *Southern Harmony* (1835), and *The Sacred Harp* (1844). However this type of music and singing came to be discredited, first in New England around 1810

and later elsewhere, as reformers influenced by European musical norms introduced music composed in the staid and/or sweet styles common in churches today. After the Civil War, gospel hymnody (often written in 7-shape notes) also rose in popularity. Nevertheless, singing from *The Sacred Harp* continued to be popular in the rural South, where there evolved a tradition of all-day singings and 2- or 3-day conventions of “Fasola” music in simple one-room churches, with dinner on the grounds, the honoring of deceased relatives and friends in Memorial Lessons, and traditional Southern hospitality and fellowship. These singings became social rituals in which the pristine elements of music, spirituality, fellowship, and food were distilled away from trappings and distractions.

While this tradition has been struggling to survive in the South in recent years, the timeless riches of Sacred Harp music have been discovered by lovers of folk and choral music outside the South, where monthly singings and annual conventions are attracting increasing numbers of singers. The increased national (and even international) visibility and appreciation have very recently stimulated renewed interest in Sacred Harp singing in its heartland in the South. In all regions, those who participate in singings find themselves welcomed into a network of friendly and accepting people of varied religious, educational, professional, and musical backgrounds who are united by a common love for this musical genre. Traditional rural singers and urban-based revivalists alike now not only sing together but communicate and share information through electronic mailing lists and World Wide Web sites. In addition, there has been a recent burst of creativity in the composition of new shape-note music rooted in the old style but often having modern touches. Until recently the spiritual aspect of singings outside the South has been generally more submerged than in traditional Southern singings, as revivalists of diverse spiritual and religious inclinations gather to create a joyful yet serious celebration of life and its temporality. However, recently there has been a trend toward increased spirituality outside the South as revivalists interact more with traditional Southern singers and deal with mortality within their own singing circles. Sacred Harp singing has been featured in national television broadcasts, including Bill Moyers’ PBS special *Amazing Grace* (1990) and *ABC World News Sunday* (July 21, 1991), in periodic features on National Public Radio, and in the 2003 movie *Cold Mountain*.

Practice of Traditional Sacred Harp Singing

Traditional Sacred Harp singings and conventions follow time-honored practices. Singers (referred to as “the class”) sit in a hollow square facing each other (one part on each side). The “arranging committee” announces in turn names of singers who wish to lead songs (“lessons”) of their choice in the center of the square. Each leader chooses a song that has not already been sung (“used”) that day and chooses the verses and repeats to be sung. The leader faces the tenor (“lead,” melody, air) part; altos are to the rear, the basses to the right, and the trebles to the left. Pitching is done without any instrument either by the leader or by an experienced singer with a good sense of relative pitch. The chosen pitch is often slightly lower than the written pitch to enable more comfortable singing. The leader sings the tenor (lead) part if possible and determines the tempo by beating of the hand (up and down with 2 or 3 beats per measure, but with slow 4/4 songs occasionally in a criss-cross pattern with 4 beats per measure). Many singers also beat time with the leader. In fact, some seats in the front rows should be reserved for the most experienced singers, who through their time-beating support the leader and help keep the class together.

The singers sing without instrumental accompaniment for their own enjoyment and inspiration rather than for a listening audience. They sing with remarkable volume, intensity, and enthusiasm. The treble and tenor parts are usually sung by both men and women, generally singing an octave apart; thus, the 4-part harmony actually has 6 parts. Dynamics tend to be de-emphasized in favor of a uniformly strong sound with pulsing rhythm and drive. The atmosphere of a Sacred Harp singing is basically one of community singing rather than choral singing, so there is usually little concern about the blending of voices or the perfection of the execution of the music. Although Sacred Harp and related shape-note music can be rendered beautifully and movingly within the alternative context of disciplined and expressive choral performance, this is never the context found at traditional singings.

Each tune (except for long anthems) is sung first by singing the syllables of the four shape notes (*fa, sol, la, mi*), followed by singing of the words. This practice conforms to and honors the singing school tradition and assists in learning the tune. The initial solmization is very helpful to those who do not sight-read standard music and is also surprisingly helpful to those who do. While “singing the notes” becomes intuitive with experience, it is of secondary importance at singings. Greater importance and personal satisfaction lie with singing the spiritually meaningful words, creating powerful music together in a friendly and accepting atmosphere, building friendships among other singers, and remembering deceased singers. These form the essence of the Sacred Harp tradition.