

# Shape Note Singing: An American



*I am a great-great-grandson of Thomas Haynes (1837–1904) and Rhoda Davis Haynes (1847–1923), whose descendants have carried on the tradition of shape-note and Sacred Harp singing for more than 150 years (Folkstreams, 2004c). While doing research for this article, I discovered that the Woottens, a family influential in the Sacred Harp tradition, are also descendants of the Haynes. The singing legacy of the Woottens is featured in the documentary film Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait (Kellen & Carnes, 2001), available online at [www.folkstreams.net](http://www.folkstreams.net), with supporting materials available. In this article, I explore the family singing tradition from historical, musical, social, and pedagogical perspectives before concluding with practical suggestions for Kodály classroom applications.*

Shape-note singing is an original style of American music, the result of frontier spirit and pioneer pragmatism applied to singing familiar psalms from the British Isles (Cobb, 1978). This tradition of American folk music can also be used to promote multiple principles of the Kodály philosophy, including music literacy, cultural literacy, and the joy of singing. By using this form of notation to augment presentation of solfège syllables, Kodály teachers can introduce their students to an intriguing and historical aspect of music notation. Beyond a mere curiosity, shape-note singing is a unique form of traditional notation offering teachers a variety of historical, social, and religious connections to the vocal arts.

Shape-note singing takes its name from the use of shaped note-heads. Though shaped-note systems date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their

origins are in the four-syllable solfège system introduced in the early seventeenth century to encourage community singing in American society.

Although unknown to many modern music educators, shaped notation is the result of an inventive solution to the challenging problem of sight-singing, which continues to vex singers and choir directors in the twenty-first century. Considering shape-note singing's composers, related social functions, musical complexity, and accessibility, it is unique among all Western music (Gordon, Barrand, & Crompton, 1995).

Unlike some other forms of religious music, shape-note compositions are not written as the result of church patronage or commissioned by wealthy patrons. Instead, the music is composed by and for avocational singers who promote cultural literacy through both the music and the lyrics. Shape-note singing is intended for the immediate experience of community singers who share in the joy of singing, not for highly-trained singers or select performance ensembles. Shape-note singing often has a contrapuntal complexity, yet it is immediately accessible to untrained singers; it is harmonically modal, yet not out of reach for avocational singers.

Founded on a simplified approach to solfège, shape-note singing has developed over a 200 year period to become a musical system with far-reaching, extra-musical influences. For social and religious reasons, shape-note singing is a remarkable, yet overlooked, development in the history of music education. Singing conventions in this tradition bring together a community of singers to share a common spiritual context.

Most important, the musical characteristics of the shaped notation itself facilitate music literacy. With respect to the Kodály philosophy, shape-note singing offers tools to address multiple musical, social, and historical teaching objectives.

## A Brief History of Shape-Note Singing

In the early eighteenth century, many religious leaders were dissatisfied with the way congregations were singing hymns. By 1720, there were growing objections to the excessive use of ornaments and embellishments and to the general departure from the original hymn tunes. Thomas Walter described this situation with unsympathetic detail in *The Grounds and Rules of Musick* (1721):

Once the tunes were sung according to the rules of music but are now miserably tortured and twisted ... For want of exactitude, I have observed in many places one man is upon one note, while another a note behind, which produces something hideous and beyond expression bad. (cited in Marrocco, 1964, p. 137)

In Boston, several ministers began teaching music literacy to their congregations to promote what they described as "regular singing," that is, singing by note and by rule, instead of "usual singing," or singing by ear (Keene, 1982).

A four-note solfège system was in widespread use in Europe and was introduced to the North American colonies by British

# Transition with Kodály Applications

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Fa Sol La Fa Sol La Me Fa

immigrants in the early seventeenth century. Based on British choral music of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Scholten, 1980), this four-note solfège singing reflects the early settlers' interest in familiar music as well as their Protestant religious beliefs. This development was based on earlier practices as first documented in a 1560 French psalter. This practice was also used in subsequent publications including a 1562 English psalter by Sternhold and Hopkins, and in the ninth edition of the *Bay Psalm Book* published in 1698 (Mark & Gary, 2007). Shaped-notation was first published in 1798 (also cited with a publication date of 1801) by William Little and William Smith in *The Easy Instructor*. It became known by a sobriquet based on the combination of its primary syllables: "fa-so-la singing."

William Law first introduced shaped notes into singing schools during a religious revival known as the "Great Awakening" in the early nineteenth century. This began a period when shaped notation had remarkable influence in American music education (McGregory, 1997). The system was adopted in singing schools throughout New England. These schools involved a traveling singing master who taught teenagers or young adults during the evenings for a period of several weeks. Following their term of study, the students presented their newly-acquired skills to the community in "singing lectures" or demonstrations and invited the experienced singers to join them. Singing schools began in Boston and soon spread to New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, and Pennsylvania as demand increased. Interest and participation in singing schools combined with a growing independence

from English publications and an interest in American composers. Between 1816 and 1855, several hundred different collections of shape-note music were assembled in America, while dozens of revisions of *The Easy Instructor* were published between 1802 and 1831 (Lowens & Britton, 1953). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the music of American composers, including William Billings and Jeremiah Ingalls, was commonly included in shape-note music collections. The appearance of these volumes served to spread interest in shape-note singing to Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, western Pennsylvania, western Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri (Scholten, 1980).

In an effort to discredit the fa-so-la system, critics such as Thomas Hastings referred to shaped notes as "dunce notes" in an 1835 edition of the *Musical Magazine* (Lowens & Britton, 1953). Lowens and Britton speculated that Hastings and others suffered from an inferiority complex regarding any form of American culture in comparison to European art and music.

By the mid-nineteenth century, choir directors in large urban centers had become the first public school music directors and rejected shaped notation, which they regarded as quaint, simplistic, and primitive. Furthermore, the itinerant musicians and teachers were frequently criticized by classically trained musicians; often the only qualifications singing masters had were a knowledge of the music notation and an enthusiasm for singing.

Even after the decline of shape-note singing began in the northeastern states in the early twentieth century, singing schools were popular in the southern states and

western frontiers. Books such as Davisson's *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), Clayton's *Virginia Harmony* (1831), Walker's *Southern Harmony* (1835), and Caldwell's *Union Harmony* (1837) facilitated the spread of shape-note singing, and enjoyed widespread popularity. The most widely-used volume, however, was *The Original Sacred Harp* (1844) published by B. F. White and E. J. King; this text continues to be used for shape-note singing conventions today. Because the voice was known as the "sacred harp," shape-note singing is often known as "Sacred Harp singing" (Gordon, Barrand, & Crompton, 1995, p. xi). Shape-note singing is a living tradition with ties to the earliest American composers and psalmodists such as William Billings (1746–1800), Jeremiah Ingalls (1764–1836), and Daniel Read (1757–1836) (Bealle, 1997; Scholten, 1980).

In the 1920s, shape-note singing was rediscovered as folk music, and the folk music revival aided the spread of Sacred Harp singing at the end of the twentieth century. For a demonstration of contemporary singing instruction in the Sacred Harp tradition, see the documentary film *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (Kellen & Carnes, 2001).

## Musical Characteristics

In one system of shape-note singing commonly used by Sacred Harp singers, four different note-heads replace the traditional oval note-heads and correspond to four solfège syllables: *fa* with a triangle, *sol* with an oval, *la* with a square, and *mi* (*me*) with a diamond. A major scale is divided into its two tetrachords created with the first three syllables plus the final syllable: *fa sol*

la, fa sol la, mi (me). The series of whole and half steps is reflected in the repeated use of the first three syllables, as shown in figure 1.

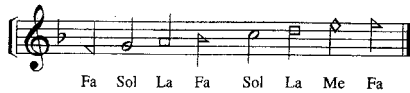


Figure 1. Major Scale in Shapes. (Gordon, Barrand, & Crompton, 1995, p. xiii)

Although the use of one syllable for two different pitches may seem awkward at first, shape-note singers usually have little difficulty distinguishing the two pitches assigned to *fa*, *sol*, and *la* because the two corresponding pitches are separated by the relatively wide interval of a perfect fourth, and because the two pitches have a similar harmonic role.

To present a more thorough system of shaped notes, arrangers introduced a system of seven shapes in the mid-nineteenth century. Because each shape corresponds to a different scale degree, arrangers promoted the seven-shape system as a way to avoid potential confusion arising from two pitches begin assigned to the same syllable and shape. Often termed “do-re-mi” systems, the seven-shape approach had begun to challenge the “fa-sol-la” notation by the mid-nineteenth century, and a rivalry over which system to use soon developed among both publishers and singers. Possibly because seven shapes are more difficult to remember and decode than four shapes, modern shape-note singers use the four-shape system more often than any of the seven-shape systems. Several of these seven-shape systems are shown in figure 2.

	Do	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol	La	Si
AIKEN, 1846 (See p. 330)	△	▽	◇	▷	◁	◻	∇
AULD, 1847 (See p. 330)	▷	◁	◇	▷	◁	◻	◻
SWAN, 1848 (See p. 334)	⊗	⊙	◇	▷	◁	◻	△
FUNK, 1851 (See p. 330)	▷	◁	◇	▷	◁	◻	◁
GILLHAM, 1854 (See p. 331)	△	◻	◇	▷	◁	◻	◇
JOHNSON, 1853 (See p. 331)	▷	◻	◇	▷	◁	◻	⊗
WALKER, 1866 (See p. 331)	△	◻	◇	▷	◁	◻	▷

Figure 2. Seven-Shape Notation Systems. (Jackson, 1965, p. 337)]

Singing master Jesse Aiken patented his seven-shape system, published in his 1846 tunebook, *The Christian Minstrel*. Other volumes using different seven-shape systems appeared later, including William Walker’s *Christian Harmony* and M. L. Swan’s *New Harp of Columbia*. After Aiken’s system was adopted and published by Ruebush & Kieffer in 1876, however, his set of syllables became the standard seven-note system. See *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Jackson, 1965) for more information about other seven-shape systems.

Regardless of the syllable system used, shaped notes are designed to facilitate singers’ music literacy, because anyone with a modicum of practice can learn the solfège for any melody quickly, and untrained singers do not need to read the key signature. Furthermore, once singers learn their parts, the syllables become unnecessary. However, singers will frequently sing the parts on solfège to review the lines and to hear the combination of syllables sung against each other (Scholten, 1980). Efforts to make the vocal parts interesting yet accessible encouraged singers’ participation and promoted their success. For example, in Davisson’s *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), the cumbersome tenor clef is abandoned in favor of the G clef for all parts except the bass (Oakley, 1978). Davisson further simplified some musical concepts in the introduction to his text, eliminated complicated explanations, and placed the songs in order of increasing difficulty.

The music in the shape-note tradition sounds distinctive; it is highly rhythmic, modal, and has open, hollow harmonies. This open harmony makes use of frequent open fifths and octaves instead of triads, creating a sound more like Renaissance music than that of the Classical or Baroque periods. The music often uses contrapuntal lines instead of block chords; each of the four lines moves independently, creating frequent dissonances between parts. The music follows the rhythm and accent patterns of the lyrics, including melismatic phrases to expressively highlight the importance of certain words. The sound of shape-note tunes stems from its origins in folk music. These melodies are often pentatonic or hexatonic, sounding tonally ambiguous and less diatonic. Furthermore, the minor-like melodies almost always

have a raised sixth degree, placing them in the Dorian mode. The arrangements themselves use unrestricted first-inversion chords, parallel octaves, and parallel fifths, suggesting quartal harmony and resulting in more tonal ambiguity (Scholten, 1980).

The three categories of shape-note pieces are plain tunes, fuguing tunes, and anthems. The plain tunes are strophic, allowing singers to sing as many verses of the hymn as they choose as well as singing any other hymn text with the same meter to the same music. The plain tunes are homophonic settings for three or four voices, most often with the melody in the tenor line. The melody of these pieces was frequently a preexisting folk melody, instrumental piece, or dance tune passed down in the oral tradition. In the fuguing tunes, all four voices usually begin together before separating during a contrapuntal section, which is often repeated. The voices are usually separated by one full measure and imitate the first entrance until the closing section, when all four voices sing the final phrase. Anthems are through-composed, having different music for each part of the text.

## Social Contexts and Practices

Making music is a social phenomenon, and learning music is fundamentally a social achievement (Etzkorn, 1989). The music and musical practices of shape-note singing are no exception. The organization, cooperation, and democratic approach of shape-note conventions situate shape-note singing in a socially-relevant context shared by singers participating in making music and finding meaning in music with other singers.

Choral singing in general is a spiritual activity and implies a particular form of communication among believers in a common faith. As articulated in *Northern Harmony* (Gordon, Barrand, & Crompton, 1995), “this singing school and shape-note music, with its resonant musical and poetic language, and its fierce and devout expressiveness, is one of the best mediums each of us has yet found for this kind of fellowship” (p. xiii). The themes of life, death, grace, and salvation, so prominent in the texts of shape-note songs, have powerful religious and metaphorical meanings. As Bealle described in his book *Public Worship, Private Faith* (1997), Sacred Harp sings and singing conventions were less about a particu-

lar faith than they were nondenominational religious experiences. Bealle wrote, "Together, singers strive to attain praise of the highest order without confronting or compromising the ecclesiastical or personal sources of religious faith" (p. xiii).

Besides the religious function of singing during worship services, shape-note singing and singing schools played an important role in the culture of nineteenth-century American communities (Keene, 1982). Sacred Harp singing includes elements of democracy in its participatory tradition. For example, any singer is allowed to lead a song, and all the songs are first sung through with syllables to acquaint all singers with the melodic line before adding the lyrics. As such, singing conventions are the only unbroken link with the music of the New England singing masters, providing a unique insight into the spirit of early American psalmody. Another aspect of musical democracy in action was the freedom musicians enjoyed to write their own shape-note music; new and original composition has been a part of this tradition since its inception (McGregory, 1997).

Singing conventions were also major community activities and served many other functions, especially in rural areas, such as to honor a prominent singer or composer in the community or a particular holiday such as May Day or just to gather on a regular basis (McGregory, 1997). People would gather for information, for political purposes, and for religious fellowship. Apart from the obvious religious connotations that hymns imply to Sacred Harp singing, there were communal connections among people of different denominations within the Christian community of singers.

The music of colonial New England and later southern Appalachia was built on shared social values. For example, Stephen Levine, a Jewish singer, participated in shape-note singing of Christian odes and anthems. In a 1996 interview, Levine reported that he appreciated "shape note's old-time values of simplicity, neighborly concern, and egalitarianism," as well as its attention to the social importance of singing and its religious overtones (Smith, 1996). While many of the singers in early New England gravitated to shape-note singing for

religious reasons, some New England singing masters and composers were agnostics or nonbelievers. Instead, they acknowledged the social fellowship and musical satisfaction they enjoyed from community singing (Gordon, Barrand, & Crompton, 1995).

Begun as informal meetings of enthusiastic singers, singing conventions evolved into semiformal musical organizations. During the nineteenth century, singing schools and conventions were held for two to four week periods in July and August. Known as "lay-by time," these months were the time when the crops were planted but not ready for harvest, and reflected the values of agrarian Southern society (Scholten, 1980). In the twentieth century, hundreds of singing conventions were held annually, attracting thousands of singers. A majority of participants used the four-shape system, while others preferred the seven-shape system. This form of traditional singing continues into the twenty-first century as well.

These gatherings lasted from one to three days and were as much social gatherings as they were musical experiences. At the conventions, opening and closing prayers as well as grace were sung. Participants frequently brought a variety of baked goods to share as another expression of fellowship and community. With home-made apple pie, dressing, coleslaw, dumplings, deviled eggs, Swiss chocolate cake, and other dishes (Folkstreams, 2004a), the atmosphere at a singing convention was like a family reunion; indeed, at many Sacred Harp conventions, families gathered annually to sing and be with each other.

In singing conventions, singers sit in sections by voice type, facing inward toward the leader. This configuration, known as a "hollow square," emphasizes that the singing is for the singers, not for an audience, making the experience of singing communal and socially cooperative. As one singer reported at a singing convention, shape-note singing is an antidote for the "it-must-be-perfect" approach to performance; it is a way to invite and facilitate singing that is enthusiastic, unrehearsed, and unapologetic (Smith, 1996).

In the twenty-first century, shape-note singing continues to be practiced as an intergenerational activity, uniting young and old singers alike in a common celebration

of faith. Although many teenagers abandon shape-note singing, they typically remember the rudiments of music literacy and return to participate in shape-note singing as young adults (McGregory, 1997). In shape-note singing, there are no auditions, and there is no room for soloists. Instead, the focus is on group participation. The approach is joyous, and the goal is to resound with an ancient-sounding joy.

## Kodály Connections

The Kodály philosophy, founded on principles of music literacy, folk music, and a cappella singing, shares many fundamentals with shape-note singing. By highlighting these common areas of interest, Kodály educators can borrow elements of shape-note singing for use in their classrooms and community choirs. Especially with the relatively recent decline in recreational singing (Elliott, 1990), shape-note singing offers unique advantages to address multiple musical, social, and literacy issues.

The musical advantages of shape-note singing in Kodály-based instruction include facilitating music literacy, enhancing student participation, and highlighting a cappella singing. Through the use of its simplified solfège system and uniquely shaped note-heads, shape-note singing offers students a direct and practical approach to two challenges facing musicians and music educators for centuries: music literacy and sight-singing.

The effectiveness of shaped notes has been studied with positive results by Kyme (1960) who compared the effect of using numbers, traditional solfège, and shaped notation on fifth-grade students' music literacy skills. He found shaped notation was significantly more effective than either of the other two approaches and concluded that, "one can justify the use of this [shape-note] notational system even in those situations where the teacher is committed to one or another 'system' of teaching music reading" (Kyme, 1960, p. 8). Twenty years after Kyme's experimental study, Scholten (1980) concluded that "the shape-note system still remains a viable, practical method for teaching vocal music reading skills" (p. 37). While Kyme's research is promising, replication of his study is needed to substantiate

the viability of using shape-note singing in everyday classroom instruction.

With respect to cultural literacy, shape-note singing offers Kodály educators a uniquely American application of music with historical importance over the past 200 years. Centered on its religious references, the cultural literacy conveyed by shape-note singing includes lessons of democracy, egalitarianism, and Protestant spirituality. The influence of democracy was instilled in the early practices of shape-note singing and continues in the traditions of Sacred Harp singing today. Combining the egalitarian spirit of neighborly concern and Protestant religious values, the shape-note singing community expresses community, tolerance, and self-reliance. The appreciation of these democratic, egalitarian, and spiritual values can enhance students' understanding of contemporary culture and give them a historical and artistic context for this unique form of American folk music.

In addition, the instructional focus of shape-note singing encourages participation by all in an unaccompanied setting. America was once known as a singing nation. In fact, the first book printed in the English colonies of North America was the *Bay Psalm Book* in 1640 (Elliott, 1990). In the intervening 350 years, vocal music in communities has declined. Elliott reported that although group singing was the primary activity in American public music education for more than 100 years, America as a nation does not celebrate its national heritage in song and has become "a nation of nonsingers" (1990, p. 25). Using elements of shape-note singing may provide Kodály teachers with another tool for enhancing student participation and music literacy through unaccompanied singing.

## Classroom Applications

Although music education curricula are frequently demanding, teachers can use shape-note singing as a tool to address several educational aims in their classrooms. Among those goals are three ideas consistent with the Kodály philosophy as described in this section: learning and using the solfège syllables in a more graphic format to improve sight-singing skills, understanding American music education in its historical context, and con-

necting the impact of singing to its underlying spiritual messages. For upper elementary through high school students, teachers are encouraged to consider the following suggestions and to determine how they might prove useful in their classrooms. Although some students would need careful explanations so as not to be confused by the shaped note-heads, many more students could benefit from an introduction to and guided experiences with shape-note singing to improve sight-singing skills, as recommended below.

The most obvious use of shaped notes is to show students how the shapes correspond to the solfège syllables in notation and performance. Lesson plans could address goals linked to the National Standards for Music Education 1: Singing a varied repertoire of music and 5: Reading and notating music (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). For this purpose, one of the seven-shape systems shown in figure 2 above might be the most practical to improve sight-singing skills. For upper elementary and middle school students, teachers might limit their presentation of shaped notes to a limited selection of syllables, perhaps gradually expanding from three syllables through the pentatonic or diatonic scales. For high school students, teachers might present both four and seven-shape systems or several seven-shape systems as shown in figures 1 and 2 above. Students could then compare and contrast each system, or perhaps devise their own systems of shaped notation. Such an approach would provide an outlet for creative thinking by using invented notation. As Campbell and Scott-Kassner advocate in *Music in Childhood* (2006), children should be encouraged to devise personal notational systems so that they can develop their own music literacy skills. By using shaped notes as an example of nonstandard music notation, teachers can spark more interest in traditional notation and perhaps lead students to a more complete understanding of music notation in general. Printed music is available from several shape-note tunebooks including *The Sacred Harp* (McGraw, 1991) and *Northern Harmony* (Gordon et al., 1995).

Some specific ideas teachers could use to incorporate shape-note singing in their classes are listed below:

- By reading and critiquing the introductory explanations of the musical rudiments in shape-note tunebooks, students could demonstrate their understanding of these terms and concepts.
- By experiencing shape-note music in both performance and notation, they could broaden their understanding of music literacy skills from another perspective.
- By inventing their own notational system, they could think creatively about the challenging task of representing music (essentially an aural experience) on paper.
- By using and comparing alternative shape-note systems, students could think critically about the relative utility of each system and suggest ideas for modifications.

Linking the mechanics of singing and music literacy to their historical roots offers teachers another way to use shape-note singing in their classroom. Lesson plans could address goals linked to National Standard 9: Understanding music in relation to history and culture. Perhaps by collaborating with a social studies teacher or developing a unit on early American history, middle and high school music teachers could put shaped notes into perspective. Students could then better understand ways of notating and learning music as practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More information about shape-note singing and its history is available from a variety of online and print resources, such as Folkstreams at [www.folkstreams.net/context,58](http://www.folkstreams.net/context,58) and the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association at <http://fasola.org>. Another application of this idea is to map the use of shaped notes in the United States over time, tracing the changes in its popularity and usage by location from colonial New England through the modern southern states. Teachers interested in these and related ideas could use one of two documentary films as resources. They are *Awake My Soul* (available from <http://awakemysoul.com>) and *Sweet Is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (available from Folkstreams).

In addition to the solfège content and historical developments, shape-note singing offers teachers a way to teach children

non-denominational spiritual messages and moral lessons. Lesson plans could address goals linked to National Standard 8: Understanding the relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts. Without the trappings of a particular faith, shape-note singing often has poignant and spiritually-based texts worthy of reflection. These provide ways teachers can develop students' overall sense of spirituality. Lyrics of many shape-note songs offer opportunities to explore metaphor and spirituality while avoiding teaching religion directly. For example, the lyrics for "Evening Shade" from *The Sacred Harp* (McGraw, 1991) make reference to death as the passing from day to night:

The day is past and gone,  
The ev'ning shades appear;  
O may we all remember well,  
O may we all remember well,  
O may we all remember well,  
The night of death is near.

From a holistic perspective, such educational goals cut across all areas of the curriculum and are important to developing "qualities of the heart and mind" (Lewis, 2000, p. 263). For more classroom applications, see the Teacher's Guide for the documentary film *Sweet Is the Day* (Folkstreams, 2004b) posted online at [www.folkstreams.net/context,64](http://www.folkstreams.net/context,64), including links to standards and benchmarks for K–12 education. By considering curricular links to music literacy, historical context, moral reflection, and other ideas, teachers can develop their own lesson plans and decide how to use shape-note singing to further their existing curricular goals.

## Shape-Note Singing Unifies Social and Pedagogical Goals

In summary, shape-note singing is a unique form of folk music, focused on a cappella singing, encouraging participation by all, and facilitating music literacy. The social and cultural climate of the twenty-first century may provide reasons for the decline in shape-note singing cited by McGraw (1991) and others. Some shape-note singers attribute its lack of popularity to an image of country simplicity and na-

iveté. Nonetheless, enclaves of shape-note singing exist, especially with affiliations to Sacred Harp conventions throughout the southeastern United States.

Shape-note singing developed from its inception in colonial New England where singing schools held great social and religious importance (Keene, 1982). Combining the practical system of *fa-so-la* solmization, shape-note singing grew to become a widespread movement of passionate Sacred Harp singers promoting four-part harmonization with social cooperation and religious fellowship. The lyrics promote a spirit of egalitarianism, simplicity, and neighborly concern among the singers. Current singing conventions across the country reinforce music literacy and community spirit by removing obstacles to participation in a socially and religiously based celebration of music for all to sing.

Especially combined with the Kodály philosophy, shape-note singing offers contemporary music educators a promising tool not only for teaching students sight-singing skills but also for promoting a cappella singing and encouraging participation. Shape-note singing remains a unique and engaging vehicle to encourage singing in America today, a timely reminder suggesting the importance of unifying social and pedagogical goals in music education.

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